



THE
SPRAG BOY.

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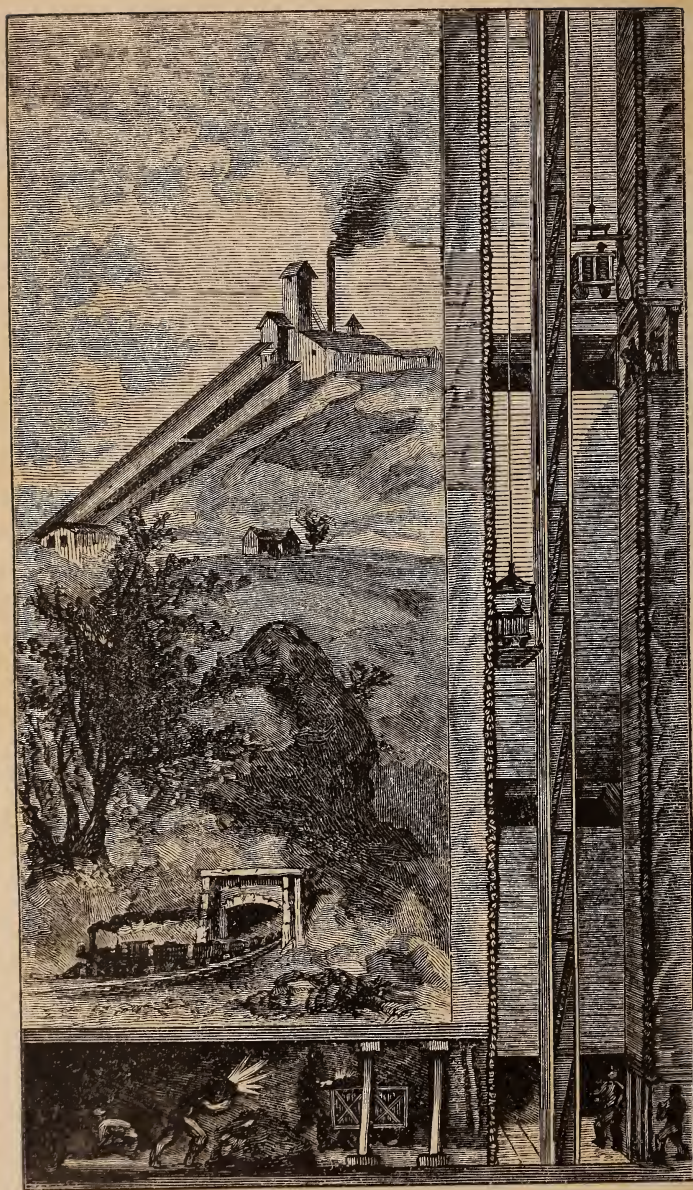


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The Sprag Boy.—Frontispiece.



“Mother, I will not be a miner-boy.”

p. 7.

THE
SPRAG BOY,
OR,
FAITHFUL IN THE LEAST.

BY HELEN B. WILLIAMS.

“Tell him that his very longing is itself an
answering cry ;
That his prayer, ‘Come, gracious Father!’
is my answer, ‘Here am I.’”

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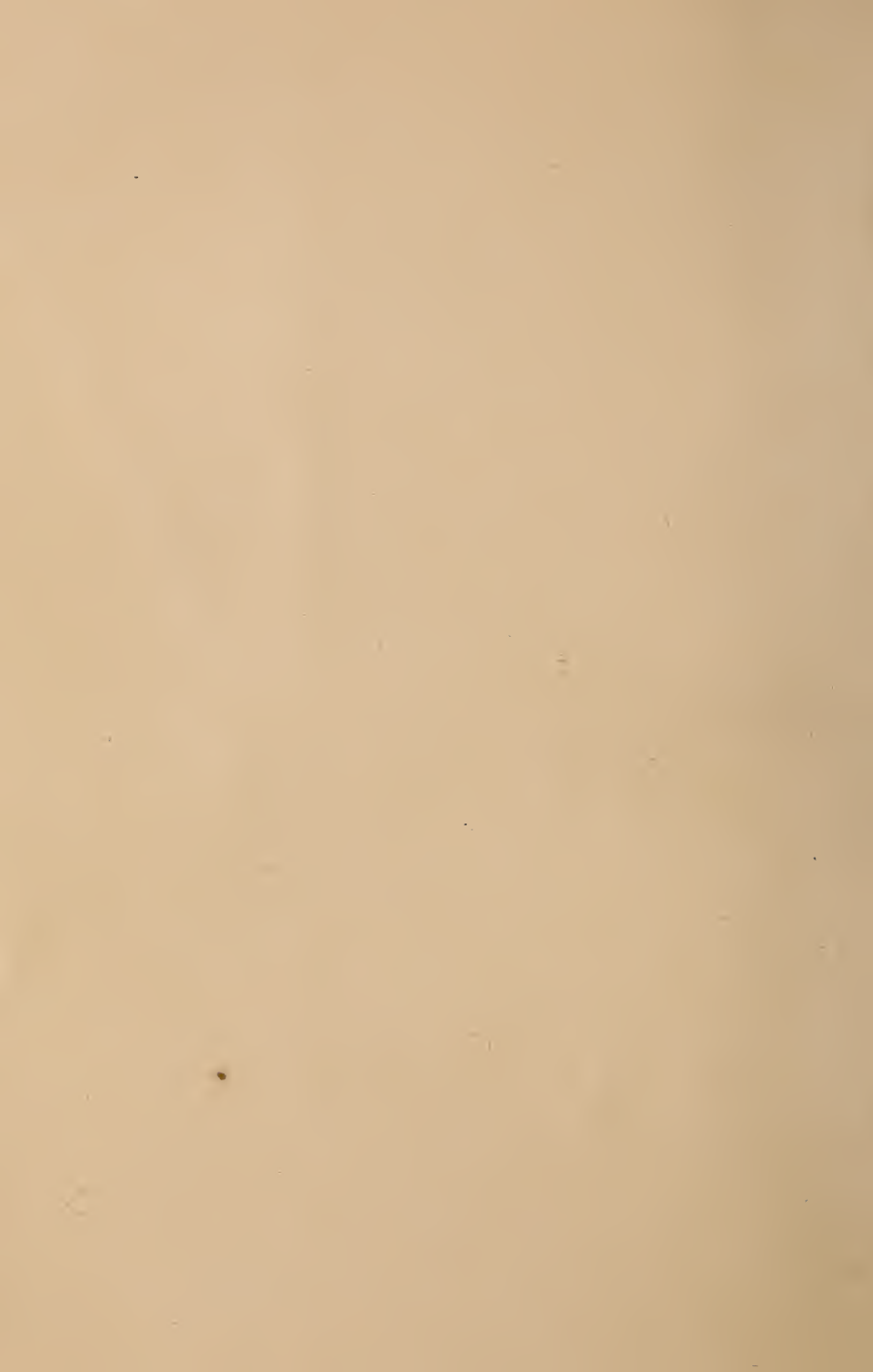
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THE SPRAG BOY.



CHAPTER I.

WAYS AND MEANS.

“**M**OTHER, I will not be a miner-boy, even to earn money to go to Greenbarre,” exclaimed Joseph; “but there is just one other thing that I can do in this miserable place: I am not ashamed or afraid to pick blackberries.”

“Perhaps you might do something at that,” observed Mrs. Ruff, thoughtfully, as she held up a half-finished garment.

These remarks were made at the close of a long conversation, in which Joseph and his mother had been discussing a question of ways and means.

“You see, mother,” Joseph continued, be-

coming more and more animated as the idea grew upon him, "there are raspberries first, and then huckleberries and blackberries. I am sure I could earn money by selling them ; and I wish you would make out an exact list of the things I shall need to begin school with next fall."

"Well," said Mrs. Ruff, considering, "there will be the new overcoat, and the school-books"—"second-hand ones from Fueri's old book-store," interposed Joseph—"and your traveling expenses."

She set down these items upon a scrap of paper, and wrote certain sums opposite them.

"Let's see how it foots up," said Joseph, eagerly taking the paper. He drew a line under the figures, and set down the amount. Then on the opposite side he wrote the word BERRIES, in large letters."

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed, with a sudden flourish. "Three cheers for Greenbarre!"

"And three cheers for the blackberries," suggested his mother, smiling ; but Joe was

out of hearing, on his way to find Lina. Lina sat upon the kitchen steps shelling peas.

"Look here," cried Joseph, "I'm going to school at Greenbarre next fall."

"How do you know?" inquired Lina, as she cracked a green pod.

"That will tell you," said Joseph, handing her the paper.

Lina read the items slowly:—overcoat, traveling money, books.

"Those are my expenses," exclaimed Joseph.

"But what do you mean by berries?" asked Lina, looking puzzled.

"Why, don't you see, you stupid?" cried Joseph. "That's the way I mean to get the money. I'm going to pick berries all summer, and sell them to the grocer. Isn't that a jolly plan?" and Joseph spun round the room on one foot.

Lina thought it would be a very "jolly plan," if he could succeed in it; and she and

Joseph fell to calculating how many quarts of berries he would have to sell a day, and how much he must get for them, in order to make up the required amount.

All that day, Joseph's head was full of the new plan, and the next morning he went out on a tour of inspection among the berry patches, which abounded in the low lands along the river. On his return, he reported that the fruit was coming on finely, and that in a very few days there would be "lots and lots" of ripe raspberries.

On a pleasant June morning about a week later, being duly equipped with pail and basket, Joseph entered upon his summer's work. He found the sun very hot, and the bushes which bore the berries, bore thorns also. Twice on the first day he slipped from a slimy log and upset his basket, spilling nearly all the berries it contained. But Joseph did not allow himself to become discouraged. He knew a good old Latin adage which means "Labor conquers all things,"

and he kept repeating it over and over, for he was determined that no toil or difficulty should turn him from his darling hope. So, that night, in spite of all hindrances, he brought home two baskets of fruit, which he sold at a very moderate price to the greengrocer. He took home the money, and exhibited it to his mother and sister with great delight.

There is not much to say about Joseph's life through the summer. One day was nearly like another. There was only the going out and standing under the glaring sun among the briers, reaching up and stooping down after the fruit-laden branches, which often, as they brushed across Joe's face, left long marks from concealed thorns. More than once Joseph fell in the swampy ground, and lost nearly a whole day's labor; and, sometimes, as the season advanced, and the hot sun dried up the fruit, he came home after a long search with almost an empty basket. But, in spite of all these drawbacks,

the little money-box in Joe's bureau-drawer at home grew heavier each week; and by-and-by, when the berries were all gone, and the last silver coin had been dropped into its place among the others, Joe took a final account of stock, and found that, with a very small addition from his mother's purse, his earnings could be made to cover his necessities. What a world of golden hopes were bound up in those few dollars! How sure Joe felt that his way to fame and fortune lay through the halls of that old academy at Greenbarre, just the other side of the mountain!

"I won't say anything to mother now," Joe thought; "but I mean to be through at Greenbarre in one year, and enter college another fall. And then"— Ah, what visions rose before Joseph! How he would delve and toil and apply himself! How he would astonish the professors and take the honors! And at last, in an old New England town, in the venerable institution of which

his mother often spoke, there would surely be a vacant chair for him, and he would be called "Professor" Joseph Ruff. Then he would send for his mother and Lina, and the rest of the future stretched before his thoughts in a long, bright line of glory. Ah, what a great, what an impassable distance there was between the grimy miners whom he met upon the street, and a grave, learned professor! How impatient he was to put such a distance between his life and the lives of those around him!

Joe shrank instinctively from the rough inhabitants and occupations of the mining town where he lived; and, amid their many misfortunes, Joe's mother had always tried to keep her children apart from the coarse and often wicked influences of the people about them. She told them of the pleasant home of other days in a quiet New England parsonage. She tried to make them feel, across the rift of years, the ennobling and holy influences which had shaped her own young

life. The children had never seen the peaceful hills that surrounded their mother's early home. They had never seen their grandfather, the venerable clergyman, whose beautiful life, as narrated by their mother, was to them an inspiration. Their earliest recollections did not travel beyond the wooded mountains which shut them in among the black coal shafts and grimy miners. But, whenever they walked down the long, dirty street, that ran by the river, to the church at the other end of the town, they always passed a large white house, apart from the rest, on a terrace. They could remember—though it seemed a dream—when that house had been their home; when, on summer evenings, they used to sit upon the broad verandah with their father and mother. How very strong and loving their father was, and how rich! But there came a sad day when he grew ill, and a far sadder day when they had no father. After this they found that they were very poor, and that the beautiful home was no longer theirs;

so they moved away to the little story and a half house at the end of the street, which the creditors said was left to them. This they fitted up with a few pieces of furniture, and Mrs. Ruff made dresses and bonnets for the more well-to-do among her neighbors. Upon this, together with a very slender income from the remnants of her husband's property, they had contrived thus far to live. But there were no prospects for Joseph—nothing but the mines, from which he shrank in horror; and, having exhausted the few advantages of the public school, the time had come when he must be sent away to be educated.

Over the mountain, at Greenbarre, was a famous Academy where, through the influence of friends, Mrs. Ruff had obtained a scholarship for Joseph; and he was to have board in the janitor's family, in exchange for some light labors about the institution. All this had been arranged at the beginning of the summer which Joseph spent so industriously. And now the last obstacle in the

way of Joseph's future seemed to have been removed.

"Just think, Lina," he said, as they walked to the Sunday-school on the first Sunday in September; "in three weeks I shall be in Greenbarre. Don't you feel glad?"

"I'm glad for you," said Lina, thinking, not very cheerfully, of the long winter walks which she must take by herself. But Joseph was too much occupied with his own interests just then to trouble himself much about Lina's feelings. All through Sunday-school he sat planning and dreaming, and the conversation about the lesson came in at his ears like a distant droning.

"And now, Master Ruff, you may tell us why your Bible namesake prospered," said Mr. Macaffie, turning his gold spectacles mildly upon Joseph, who sat with an abstracted expression in the corner. Joe started and colored at hearing his name spoken.

"Sir?" he asked, looking blank.

“Because the Lord was with him,” whispered the boy next—“Because the Lord was with him,” Joseph repeated aloud.

“Yes,” said Mr. Macaffie; “as I have just been telling you, it was the Lord who brought Joseph out of prison, and caused him to be a ruler in Egypt. Boys, don’t crowd so,” he continued; “move down a little, and try to sit still.”

Somebody at the end of the seat gave a lurch, which was communicated along the line, and the boy next to Joseph put his feet out to brace himself. What fine new shoes he wore, with bright tops and thick, strong soles! Joe’s shoes were run down at the heels, and there was an appearance of giving way at the toes which a careful blackening had failed to conceal.

“I shall have them capped,” he said to himself, “and they’ll last me good all winter.”

Joe gave himself a determined brace against the seat, as if to enforce the matter of lasting good, and in doing so there ap-

peared an ugly yawn in the side leather upon his right foot. Joe lifted it quickly to a more convenient position. "I didn't know that was there," he thought, passing his finger over the crack. "There are more coming, too," he reflected, examining sundry other diagonal creases. "It's going to give out all over; there is no use capping a shoe like that." Joe put his two feet down again.

What a great gap this little crack seemed to make in his future! His shoes would certainly fail him, and new ones could not be had for less than three dollars and a half; and that sum taken from that small pile in Joe's bureau-drawer at home would leave—well, no matter how much; and then, what would he do for—but Joseph ought not to have been planning about these things at the Sunday-school. What a pity it was that he did not stop thinking of his troubles altogether! Who knows how much direction and help might have been sent to him through that Sunday-school lesson? But he

did not suppose there was anything in God's word that would help a boy in so humble a matter as a pair of shoes.

"So Joseph sent wagons for all his family, and brought them down to Egypt, and took care of them," continued Mr. Macaffie; and just then the bell rang, and it was time to put up the books. Somehow, these last words caught Joe's attention.

"I wish I could take care of my family," he said dejectedly, and he fell to calculating again, and was hard at it all through the last prayer and closing hymn.

"Good-bye, boys," said Mr. Macaffie.

"Good-bye, teacher," cried his thoughtless pupils, as they rushed out. Joe staid behind a minute to fold his lesson-leaf and place it in his Bible.

"Well, Joseph," said Mr. Macaffie, laying his broad hand kindly on the lad's shoulder, "I don't suppose you are likely to get sold by your brethren, as your Bible namesake was; but I dare say there will be a great

many times in your life when you'll feel that you are cast into prison."

"Yes, sir," said Joseph, with rather a vague idea of his teacher's meaning.

"Be sure and remember Joseph's God, then, my boy," the kind teacher continued, impressively; "be sure you do."

"Yes, sir," returned Joseph, as he bade Mr. Macaffie good-bye, and walked down the steps. On the sidewalk stood Lina.

"I wish you would wait inside for me," said Joseph, looking rather impatiently at her faded muslin dress.

"Very well, I will," replied his obedient sister. An uncommonly sharp gust of wind blew up just then from the river.

"This is very cold for the first of September," said Joseph, glancing again at his sister's thin gown. "Haven't you got any better dress than that?"

"Joe, you know I haven't," Lina answered. They trudged on a distance in silence.

"Look at that, Lina," said Joseph, ab-

ruptly, thrusting out his shoe. This was precisely the thing which he had not meant to do; but the little ugly crack yawned at him, and exasperated him, and a voice kept whispering such unpleasant things, "Who cares if your shoes do give out, Joseph? That's all the pay you'll ever get for being industrious. Just tramp right along, and step on all the sharp stones you can, and cut some more holes. There is no use in your ever trying to have anything or be anybody."

"What a pity!" said Lina, bending over the broken shoe.

"Yes, it is a pity," returned Joseph, desperately. "It's a pity that our things ever wear out at all, for we never can have any new ones."

"You have some money," suggested Lina, thoughtfully.

"How much have I?" cried Joseph, in rising tones. His thoughts had danced themselves dizzy over the poor little pile all through Sunday-school.

"I don't know exactly," returned Lina.

"What is the reason that people have to have things, and can't get them?" exclaimed Joseph. "What is the reason that some people can never get on in the world?"

"Well, Joe, you know that it is because father lost his money in the coal mine and died, that we cannot get on," returned Lina. "If father had lived, I'm sure we shouldn't be this way," she continued, tearfully.

Just then the children came round the corner in sight of their house, and in sight also of the ugly, black buildings that rose up high over the deep coal mine where the grimy miners went every day with their lamps and pick-axes.

"May be I shall have to work in a coal mine all my days," observed Joseph.

"Oh, Joe," said Lina, "you know you are going to school at Greenbarre this winter."

"Can I go to Greenbarre in my stockings?" asked Joseph, in tragic tones. He followed his sister through the gate, which

grated heavily on its broken-down hinges, and imparted a slovenly look to the premises.

"Our place looks so run down, Joseph," said Lina.

"We are run down," said Joe, moodily.

When the Sunday dinner was finished, Joe took a book and went up stairs. He walked straight to the bureau, and took out the box which contained his money. Such a little pile it was, and he had worked so hard for it!

"I'll not be cheated out of going to Greenbarre for the want of a pair of shoes," he said, resolutely; and he went over and over again the financial problem which was, or seemed to be, a question of making two and one equal four. Perhaps his mother could help him; but Joe dismissed that thought at once. There were the taxes coming due and fuel to be bought, not to mention a dress for Lina, and other things for which Joe felt quite sure that his mother had not the money. But at last a thought occurred to him. He could

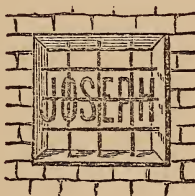
do without the Latin dictionary, and the money thus saved would buy the shoes.

"I could borrow some fellow's dictionary while he is not using it," said Joseph to himself, not without a misgiving—for had he not set his heart upon a Latin lexicon! Perhaps he could find some way to earn one after he reached Greenbarre. With this thought Joseph was consoled. Just then the whistle of a locomotive echoed through the valley, and a freight train thundered round the curve in the mountains.

"Hurrah for Greenbarre!" cried Joseph, springing up with sudden enthusiasm, and running to the window; "before three weeks are over I shall be dashing along that track out into the world!" How the blood leaped through Joseph's veins at the thought of it! He seemed already to feel the swift motion and the sudden expansion of all his hopes.

Two boisterous miners just then were passing by the window. "Ah," said Joseph, while he looked exultingly upon them, "I

shall never grow up to be such as you are!" and away down in the future Joseph fancied he saw himself in fine broadcloth, walking across the college campus with a professor's note-book under his arm.



CHAPTER II.

A NEW DIFFICULTY.

“MY son, there has been a delay of the small monthly income which, as you know, is all that remains of your father’s property except this house.” It was Monday morning, and Joe was standing alone with his mother in the little front room, which they called the “shop.”

“Haven’t you had the draft this month, mother?” he asked, with a start.

“No,” she answered; “but I have received a letter from the trustee who has the business in charge, mentioning financial troubles, which I cannot now explain to you, and saying that the payments must be delayed.”

“How long?” asked Joseph, in a trembling voice.

“I do not know,” replied his mother.

There was a short silence; Joseph was not

thinking of his mother's troubles just then, but of those golden hopes of his, over the mountain at Greenbarre.

"Can you tell anywhere near how long it will be delayed?" he asked.

"I have no idea," replied Mrs. Ruff, gravely.

"Then, if it doesn't come by next week I cannot go to the Academy," said Joseph, speaking very slowly.

"My son," said his mother, "it is impossible for us to decide upon anything to-day; but if circumstances should close the way before you, I trust you will be willing to give up this plan patiently."

"Would you be willing to have me give it up?" said Joseph, quivering and pale with excitement. "Indeed! I shall not give it up quietly. I shall not give it up at all. Do you think I am going to stay in this detestable place all my days, and be a miner?" he continued, in tones which grew sharp and shrill as he gradually saw the extent of the

misfortune that threatened him. "I won't submit to it. I've a mind of my own, and I'll do something."

"What will you do, Joseph?" asked his mother.

"I don't know," said Joseph, sitting down and speaking more quietly; "I shouldn't think you would be the one to want to have me give up having an education," he continued, reproachfully.

"I am not the one to want you to rush against any door which God has closed up," said Mrs. Ruff; "but if I have one wish stronger than all others, it is that you may be fitted for a useful and happy life."

"But, if I am to be fitted for a useful life, I must go to Greenbarre," said Joe, petulantly.

"That we do not know," returned Mrs. Ruff. "It does seem so now, but God may have other plans. We must wait patiently until we know them."

Mrs. Ruff now arose, and taking a piece

of work began with a cheerful and resolute face to stitch up the long seams. Joseph knew perfectly well that there could be no more conversation till the day's work was ended; so he walked away into the kitchen where Lina went humming about, clearing away the dishes.

"Lina," he said in brief tones, "it's all up about Greenbarre."

Lina dropped her dishes and stared.

"All up!" she echoed, "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I can't go, because mother's income has stopped coming."

"Forever?" asked Lina.

"Well, no, I don't think so," returned Joseph, "but we don't know when we shall have it again."

"That is why mother cried on Saturday," observed Lina, thoughtfully. A silence followed.

"Father's other money was lost, and I dare say this will be," said Lina, at last.

"You're very cool about it, Miss," cried Joe, indignantly. He had expected some consolation from his sister.

"I am not cool about it, Joe," replied Lina, shaking her head; "but it might happen."

"Let it happen, then," answered Joe, recklessly; "who cares? And I'll be a dirty miner-boy."

"Now, Joseph," began Lina, "don't you ever say that."

"Why not?" said Joe. "What's to hinder? I can't go to Greenbarre."

"I'm not sure," returned Lina.

"Why?" asked Joe.

"Well," continued Lina, with a certain wise, reflective way of hers; "There has been a great deal done about it. Mother wrote to the Principal of the Academy, and our minister used influence, and they got a scholarship for you—and then you worked hard all summer to earn the money to buy your things; and I think when there has been so much done, something must be sure to come

of it." With this wise conclusion Lina resumed her work. Joseph could not help being encouraged by his sister's final observations.

"Perhaps the money may come yet before the twentieth," he said to himself, as he went up stairs to his room. There, upon the table, lay the pile of books, from which he had been studying for the examinations. How well thumbed they were! How he had pored over his Algebra and plodded through his Translations—all with the dear hope of entering the Greenbarre Academy "in advance." But now the baleful influences of uncertainty came between Joseph and his books. What was the use in puzzling over a hard sentence in Cæsar's Commentaries, when no one could know whether he would ever be called upon to read it? Joe idled about his room. What a change had come over his plans since Saturday! There was the crack in the shoe. He discovered it first in Sunday-school, and the lesson was about

Joseph. He didn't remember much about that, but he did remember Mr. Macaffie's charge: "Be sure and look to Joseph's God, my boy, if ever you find yourself in prison." "I'm there now, surely," thought Joe; "and I don't know how I am ever to get out."

He took down his Bible, and read the story of Joseph's life. He was surprised to find it so interesting. Perhaps he had never read it all through before so carefully.

"I expect he must have felt as much discouraged as I do now, while he was in that prison," thought Joe; "and it must have been a great surprise to him to be taken out so suddenly and made a ruler over Egypt. I don't care anything about being made a ruler, but I do care about having an education. God helped Joseph because he was doing right, and I'm sure I am doing right to want an education. I want it so as to be able to take care of my mother and sister. God helps the right," he continued, with sudden energy, going over to his table of books,

“and he’ll help me; but God helps those who help themselves, and I am going to work. I will study as hard as I can, and believe that the money will come before the term opens.”

That day, and the next and the next after, there was a very industrious student in a certain upper room of Mrs. Ruff’s house.

Every day he took time enough from his books to walk down to the post-office and see if there was any letter, for Joe expected that a letter with money in it would certainly come.

He offered several prayers upon the subject, longer, perhaps, than he had ever made before, explaining his plans to the kind Father in heaven, and asking help to carry them out.

Each day Joe came home empty-handed from the post-office, but he assured his mother that they would certainly have the money before school opened.

As for Mrs. Ruff, she said nothing, but

stitched industriously on, and the miners' wives declared that her display of fall bonnets was finer than it had ever been before.

A week went by, and one morning Joe was summoned to a private conference with his mother.

"Joseph," she said, as they closed the door of the front room, "there is a matter which I think we must decide about immediately. If you are not sure of being able to enter the Academy at the beginning of the term, word should be sent at once to the Principal." Joseph turned pale.

"I could do without the dictionary, and use that money for the shoes," he said, faintly, feeling all the while what a coward he was to propose running away from his mother in her difficulty.

"You know it will cost less to live if I am away," he said, trying to think that he spoke generously, "and we shall never really be any better off until I am educated, and can take care of you and Lina. I certainly can-

not do anything to help you here," he added in very positive tones. How black the shaft buildings looked just then, as Joe glanced at them from the window! Mrs. Ruff was not a mournful person, but I believe at that moment a sigh escaped her.

"My dear boy," she said, "I do appreciate your feelings, and I bear your disappointments with you—would that I might bear them for you; but I have found that if God really closes up any way before us it is useless to try and struggle through the obstructions, when he means us patiently to submit."

"Then I suppose I'm to sit meekly down and do nothing." said Joseph, with something like a sneer.

"By no means," returned his mother, quickly; "you are to stand meekly up and look humbly about, until you see some sign of the opening which God will certainly make for you. Then you are to go to work with all your might. Joseph, I feel that God may have set for you a lesson which some of us

learn through great tribulation much farther on in life—the hardest of all lessons, but one which when learned makes life beautiful and happy—that, strive and struggle as we may, we must be governed by God's plans, which are always best."

"I don't want to be governed," muttered Joseph, sullenly; "I wish I were a man."

"You must know," continued Mrs. Ruff, "that fully one-half our resources have been suddenly and most unexpectedly cut off. As far as our daily living is concerned, Lina and I would try and get on with what comes to us from the dress-making. I believe we do still indulge in some little luxuries that might be cut off; but there is another matter, Joseph. Next week the taxes must be paid upon this house."

Joseph moved impatiently, and his thoughts traveled up stairs to the money-box in the bureau drawer.

"I have thought sometimes of borrowing the money," his mother continued, "but

there is no one to whom I have any right to go. Besides, we have no security to offer except a mortgage, which I should be very unwilling to put upon the house. My son, do not be discouraged. The money may come yet to relieve us; but, while I do not give up all hope of your going to Greenbarre, I feel it would be wrong not to let the Principal know of the uncertainty."

"Then you will write and tell him that I give up the scholarship!" exclaimed Joseph.

"No; I will write and tell him precisely how the matter stands," said Mrs. Ruff. "I will tell him that you may still come."

"It's just the same as giving it up," said Joseph. "Some other fellow will get the scholarship."

"Not if God intends it for you," returned his mother.



CHAPTER III.

A FALL.

THE next day Joseph went on a long errand to carry home some work for his mother. When he returned, she was sitting in the little parlor with an open letter in his hand.

"What does it say, mother?" asked Joseph, eagerly.

"My dear boy," she answered, "everything that we have is lost."

"Not the house, mother!" exclaimed Joseph in dismay.

"No, not the house," she interposed quickly, "we have still something to be thankful for."

"Do you think we shall starve?" asked Joseph, with a quaver in his voice, for he was seriously frightened.

"No, no," replied his mother, rousing her-

self, "not so long as we have a Father in heaven."

"I thought likely the money would be lost," observed Lina, who stood by her mother's chair with pale cheeks and eyes wide open.

"No you didn't," retorted Joe, "you didn't know anything about it."

Now that the first fright was over, Joe began to be angry. He had been used to poverty nearly all his life, but never before had his plans been thwarted. He had always been the best scholar at the public school and the favorite of his teacher. In fact, every one spoke well of him, and in his small way he had been successful. But here was a new experience : something undertaken and worked hard for—yes, prayed over, that was about to prove an utter failure. Joseph rebelled. He thrust his cap over his eyes and went out and sat down on a dry-goods box behind some bushes in the yard.

It would not be well to speak of all his

thoughts as he sat alone and unseen. He was angry with every one—with the trustee, for not foreseeing and preventing the loss of the money; with his mother and Lina and himself, because they three had fallen into such trouble and could not get out of it; and worst of all, it is to be feared that he was angry with the great God in heaven for not helping him to carry out his plans. "It's very strange that God doesn't help a person to do right," thought Joseph; "what good is it to trust Him?"

The next two or three days Joseph spent in idling about the house and yard. He was unwilling to give up his plan of going to Greenbarre, yet he could see no way to carry it out. "There's no use in studying any more," he said, as he sat on the steps of the side door. He could hear the rapid click of his mother's sewing-machine as it flew over the seams, and Lina was singing as she worked about in the kitchen. Only he was doing nothing: there seemed to be nothing

for him to do. It had never been so before. There had always been great plans and hopes to look forward to, but now there seemed to be nothing in his life that was worth the doing—at least Joseph thought so. The singing in the kitchen drew nearer until Lina looked over his shoulder.

“Joe,” she said, “I think it is a good time to fix up the front gate, when there is nothing else to be done.”

“What’s the use?” said Joseph, lazily kicking the little pebbles that lay about the walk.

“Why, because it looks so!” replied his sister.

“Who comes to look?” asked Joe.

“The customers at the shop,” returned Lina.

“They’re no good,” grumbled Joe.

“Yes, they are,” Lina answered. “Everybody is of some good; but they’ll not think us any good, if we leave the hinge off from our gate. I know it worries mother to have

things lie about so," continued Lina, glancing about the yard, "and she can't afford to hire any one to fix it up. Now I'll tell you what I thought we could do. You mend the gate, and then get an axe and cut down all those bushes except the lilacs, and we will dig up the burdocks and carry that old dry-goods box down into the cellar. Then we'll rake the yard all off, and sweep the walk and scrub the steps. Will you do it?"

"No," responded Joseph, with an idle whistle.

"Why not?" asked Lina.

"I don't care a pin about this place anyway," he answered.

"It's all the place we've got," said Lina; and she went back into the house. After awhile Mrs. Ruff came out and asked Joseph to take home a piece of work.

He sauntered lazily away to do the errand, and then sauntered as lazily back. "Suppose we weren't poor," he reflected as he passed the white house on the terrace.

"Suppose the trustee should write and tell mother that people had cheated father, and he would get us back all the property. I wonder whether we should stay here or go to New England to live." First Joseph hoped they would go, and then he hoped they wouldn't; and just as he was launching out into a long day-dream upon this subject he came in sight of the house. There was a doctor's gig standing before the gate—an unheard-of thing for the Ruff family—strange faces were at the window, and somebody was upon the steps. Joe immediately roused from his reverie and ran toward the house.

"What is the matter?" he cried in frightened tones, without waiting to be near enough for an answer.

Through the gate he rushed, and up the walk into the parlor, among the neighbors who stood around the sofa where his mother was lying.

"Yer ma's took a fall," said one of the women, noticing his terrified face.

"You will have to be feet for your mother now, my boy," said the kind doctor as he gathered up his bandages, "she has broken her ankle, and she cannot walk for a long while."

After a little time Joe's mother recovered from the faintness which was caused by the great pain of having the bone reset. Then she was bolstered up in a rocking-chair, and one by one the neighbors left. Joseph listened attentively to all the directions of the physician, and watched with admiring air while he polished his gold eye-glasses and wrote out a prescription. Then he followed the doctor's portly figure down the yard and dragged nervously at the gate.

"Let me help you," said the big doctor, and they two together lifted it aside, Joe wishing meanwhile for a good pair of hinges more than he had ever wished for anything before in his life. When the boy returned to the house he found his mother looking quite bright and natural again; and he soon

heard the whole story, how she ran upstairs for something in a great hurry, leaving a customer in the shop, and how, coming back, she tripped in the carpet and fell the whole flight of stairs; and how Lina, hearing her, screamed, and the customer in the shop screamed, and they both ran together and found Mrs. Ruff trying to get up; but as soon as she stood upon her feet she fell again and fainted, and they called in the neighbors and sent for the doctor, and he said it was a bad fracture, and she fainted three times while the ankle was being reset.

“And now she cannot walk one step all winter,” said Lina, wiping her eyes; “but she will be so comfortable in the easy-chair, and I am so thankful that her neck was not broken.”

“And she shall not have one thing to worry her,” exclaimed Joseph, feeling all the dignity of a man. Suppose it had turned out differently—suppose he had found his dear, bright mother lying dead! Joe felt

something choking him as he walked away to the window. How busy his thoughts were! He forgot for a little about his own dear plans and his own selfish self.

"Mother shall not want for anything," he said; "I will take care of her."

The next morning Mrs. Ruff insisted that the children should draw her easy-chair into the shop and place her before the work-table.

"Do not be discouraged," she said, "we shall get on famously. I shall do the cutting and basting, and Lina may stitch."

Upon this, Joe, who had been absent-minded all the morning, walked resolutely up stairs to his bureau, and taking out the little money-box, emptied all the bright coins into the pocket of his coat. He came directly down again with his hat.

"Mother," he said, briskly, as he jingled the coins in his pocket, "I'm going to pay the taxes."

Joe's mother looked up, and at first her

face was very sad ; but as she looked into Joe's eyes it became very glad.

"Joseph," she said, earnestly, "I believe God is going to make a good man of you."

How tall Joe felt all the way down the street, and with what a business air he walked into the tax office and interviewed the collector !

"That there little son of poor Ruff is a right smart little fellow," said one of the men, when Joseph had finished his business and gone out. There was still money in Joe's pocket, and he went round to the coal office and ordered some fuel. As he retraced his way through the long, dirty street, Joe's steps flagged. It was a sort of heroic thing that he had been doing. True, it was only a plain duty, but it had involved a sacrifice which Joe unasked had made bravely. The approval of his conscience, and his mother's grateful surprise, and a certain excitement which came with making the effort, kept Joseph up all the way down to the tax

office. Then there was the sense of independence which comes with having money in the pocket, and the novelty of transacting business: but none of these helps remained now.

The business was done, and the money was gone; so were all the hopes that had cheered the ambitious lad through the long hot days in the berry-patches. There was no pleasant winter at the Academy at Greenbarre for Joseph now. The last hope had vanished with the last dollar he counted out at the tax office. What wonder that Joe's spirits took a sudden turn downward! He reached home at last, and sat down dejectedly upon the steps.

"I really and truly don't know what to do next," he said to himself. "I want to help my mother. I must help her: but what can a boy like me do in a place like this?"

Again and again he tried to devise some plan, but there seemed absolutely nothing to plan about. After awhile his eye fell upon

the hingeless gate, and he blushed as he recalled the assistance which he had received from the doctor the day before in opening it.

"No one shall ever have a chance to lift on that gate again," he cried, springing up with sudden energy—"not as long as I have a hammer to work with."

Joe disappeared into the wood-house, but soon returned again with his hands full of tools.

"What is that hammering, mother?" asked Lina as she sat sewing in the shop; and she laid down her work and went to the window.

"Why, mother," she exclaimed, "would you believe it? Joseph is mending the gate."

Joseph worked vigorously, and began to feel a sort of exhilaration. Who knew what might come of his labor? Great results sometimes grow out of trifling incidents. Joe had read tales of careful little boys who obtained fine situations by so small an action as stooping down to pick up a pin. He indulged a vague hope that some passing

stranger might be struck by his thrifty exertions, and open a door for him to fame and fortune. The gate being finished, he brought an axe and cut down the straggling underbrush, and with rake and broom effected a commendable transformation in the place. Joe's mother and sister watched admiringly from the window, but no appreciative stranger leaned over the fence and offered Joseph a clerkship.

Nevertheless, when the work was done he felt rewarded. There were the thanks of his mother and Lina, also the pleasure of beholding the change in the yard. But besides this, there came with the work a kind of new strength to Joseph. He had sat down crushed under the pressure of a great misfortune, but when he found grace to rise up and perform a humble piece of work, simply because it was his next duty at that moment, he began to overcome his misfortune by taking a step toward the only path which leads to true prosperity, the path which

can only be found by submission to God's will.

That night Joe sat late with his mother over the smouldering fire, looking out into the future ; and with all their looking they could see nothing before them but want.

"There is sure to be help, for there always is," said Mrs. Ruff.

"But what am I to do, mother?" asked Joseph. "I can't make dresses like you and Lina ; I will go to-morrow and talk with Mr. Macaffie."

His mother said that could certainly do no harm.

GOD'S CARE



CHAPTER IV.

JOE ASKS COUNSEL.

THE next afternoon Joseph made himself as neat as possible, and set out for the home of his teacher.

Mr. Macaffie was a good man who, after great reverses in fortune, had settled down to live out his last years quietly on slender means.

Joseph rang the bell, and was admitted into a small library. His heart rather failed him when he heard a step on the stair, for he was not exactly certain what he had come to talk with his teacher about.

"Well, Joseph," said Mr. Macaffie, as he entered and grasped his scholar's hand cordially, "I am very glad to see you. I have just been talking with my wife about you and your mother. I have heard of your recent misfortunes."

"Have you?" asked Joseph.

"Yes, my boy, with sincere sorrow, and I dare say you have come to talk them over with me."

"That is just what I came for," said Joseph, feeling relieved.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Macaffie, sitting down. "I thought so. Well, now, I presume that your mother's accident and the loss of your little income have interfered seriously with your plans."

"They have," replied Joseph. "I had to give up going to Greenbarre—and it has been a great misfortune," he added with something like a quaver, as he felt Mr. Macaffie's eyes fixed upon him in sympathizing scrutiny.

"And you had quite set your heart upon going there!" said Mr. Macaffie.

Joseph was moved to speak of all his struggles, his hopes and fears, his dread of the mines and his desire for an education. He had never before opened his heart so

fully to any one but his mother. Mr. Macaffie listened attentively until the story was finished. Then he arose and began to pace the floor.

"Yes," he said, speaking more to himself than to Joseph, "it has been a disappointment, a very serious one, and there is some meaning to it."

"It seems strange that it should have turned out so when I prayed about it," said Joseph, in aggrieved tones. "You told me a few weeks ago to remember Joseph's God when I got into prison, Mr. Macaffie; and you see how I have come out."

"Mr. Macaffie stopped in his walk, and sitting down by Joseph said in an impressive whisper, "Do you suppose that Joseph, when he was down in that pit, made a plan to be sold into Egypt, and then prayed for it until God sent the Ishmaelites along?"

"No, certainly not," said Joseph, quite puzzled, "I don't suppose he knew what would become of him until he was pulled out."

"Just so," continued Mr. Macaffie, with an approving gesture. "That matter of being sold into Egypt was God's plan, not Joseph's; but I reckon it was a great deal better for him than anything he could have thought out for himself."

"But Joseph had a plan afterwards for getting out of prison in Egypt," said Joe. "He asked the chief butler to remember him."

"So he did," responded Mr. Macaffie, "and he was right in doing it. We are never sure beforehand what God's way is, and we must always try every means in our power. But you know the chief butler forgot him, and he had to wait, after all, two whole years in prison, until God's time came for taking him out. My dear boy, perhaps when you made your plans for going to Greenbarre you left God out of the account. Perhaps you only thought of getting on in the world, and raising yourself and your family out of poverty. That is very good

and desirable, but it would be dangerous to succeed in anything that you undertook without first consulting your heavenly Father. I am afraid you didn't call upon God until things began to go wrong with you, and then instead of 'Lord, teach me thy way,' I am afraid you said, 'Lord, give me my way.' Isn't that true?"

Joseph was silent, but he felt that his teacher was right.

"You mustn't be surprised," continued Mr. Macaffie, "if you are put down in a pit. It is the safest place sometimes for a man or boy."

"But what am I to do?" asked Joseph.

"First you must have God on your side, or, rather, you must go over to God's side. You may be sure there will not be much light until you have done that. What I mean is that you must be willing to live by God's plan, and let him do what he chooses with your own plans: but I do not mean that you should be discouraged and not try for any good thing again. I am sure that

when you have wholly submitted, God will open some door."

"I don't see what door there can be here," said Joseph, moodily.

"It is a mysterious dispensation," said Mr. Macaffie, beginning to pace the floor again. "The Lord must have shut you up for some loving purpose, Joseph. Be of good courage and wait on him. I am a poor man and out of business. If it were with me as it once was, I might do something for you, but I do not know of any situation that I could now get for you, either here or in any other place. It seems as if I might do something," he continued, anxiously, "but I know that God has a plan, and if I am to take a part in it he will surely let me know. I believe this is a test place in your life," he said, solemnly, as Joseph rose to go. "Remember that it is better to do anything with God than everything without Him. I would rather see you a sprag boy by God's direction than an emperor trusting in your own might."

On the way home Joseph felt that Mr. Macaffie had not given him much light. "I am to trust in God and be willing to give up Greenbarre, but how will that help me to know what I am to do this winter?" Joseph passed by the shaft-buildings just then, and saw a bit of board hung out at the side, with—"Wanted, a Sprag Boy," painted upon it in black letters. Joe started and remembered Mr. Macaffie's final words. An impulse seized him which was a surprise to himself, and he walked across the stony piece of ground which lay between him and the shaft office.

He slowly pushed the door open, and stood upon the threshold. A man inside sat upon a high stool before a rough, dirty desk.

"How much do you pay sprag boys?" asked Joe, addressing him. The man answered without looking up from his writing, and Joe walked away again.

"I only wanted to know," he said to him-

self. "Of course it will not do me any good. It's good wages, though," he added, as he walked thoughtfully towards home.



CHAPTER V.

THE SPRAG BOY.

JOSEPH'S mother over-exerted herself with cutting and fitting, and one morning she woke up with a fever. The doctor came, and said she must rest herself and take a nourishing diet. Lina was obliged to turn away two customers who came for dresses to be made that morning. Joe went to market with a basket, taking his mother's purse, which had only a very little money in it.

"What shall we do?" Joseph kept asking himself all the way home; but he shut his eyes when he passed the shaft where hung the board with "Wanted, a Sprag Boy" on it. He reached home at length and took the parcels from his basket and laid them upon the kitchen table, charging Lina to broil the small chicken for their mother, a joint at a

time. Then he went to his room and, having shut the door, took out a paper and pencil. On one side he set down "Expenses." He knew pretty well what they were. Coals for the fires, and provisions—there was a long row of items under this head. He footed them all up and wrote the sum underneath. Then over against this he set a certain sum that had been named to him at the shaft office. This sum he multiplied by six, for, said he, "there are six working days in the week." He seemed distressed to find that the result compared very favorably with the sum under "Expenses."

"Then I must do it," he muttered, in tones of despair, and he leaned his head upon the table and saw a very doleful vision—a dreary, dark place, down under the ground, where a boy with dingy clothes and a dingier face worked on and on. There was not one ray of sunshine about this picture.

"What would people say?" he asked himself. "Would they ever speak to me again"?

Could he ever go to church any more with his black hands and face? He certainly could never hope to be a professor. No sprag boy was ever known to rise to that high estate, Joe felt certain. He went down stairs and looked at his mother as she lay on the sofa. He wanted to talk with her, but that would never do. People with fevers could not help other people to decide their difficult questions. Joe went to find Lina. She sat crying by the kitchen-table.

"Oh, Joe," she said, "we've got nobody to take care of us, and there is such a very little money left."

Joe went away and stood by himself in the wood-shed a few minutes. Then he came in again, and took down his hat from the peg on the kitchen wall. Lina saw him walk down the yard and out into the street, and wondered where he was going. It did not take him long to reach the shaft and enter the small, dirty office.

"Do you want a sprag boy?" he asked,

addressing the man at the desk. The man laid down his pen and looked up.

"We do," he returned, surveying Joe. "Are you sure you want the place?"

"Yes, sir," Joe answered, gulping down a lump in his throat.

Somehow the sights about him affected Joe's courage. Through the square of dusty window he could see the ropes which moved the platform (or car, as it was called) up and down in the shaft, turn slowly over their greasy wheels, and a perceptible oily smell was wafted from them into the office. It was nearly night, and groups of miners, with their smoky lamps flaring in their hats, were lifted out of the mine and scrambled with wild shouts and jests over the great "culm" banks that lay by the shaft. It did not require long to complete the little bargain that Joe was making in the office, and having agreed to be in his place at the proper time the next morning, he walked away toward home.

Joe's heart nearly failed him when he sat down with Lina at supper. Their mother lay asleep in the next room. When the meal was finished and Lina was clearing the table, Joe hung about her as though he had something on his mind.

"Lina," he said, abruptly, "I have found a thing to do that will give us a good deal of money. It isn't mining at all, but something about sprags."

"A sprag boy?" suggested Lina, looking earnestly at her brother.

Joe nodded his head.

"And you will have to go down in the mine," she continued, in a solemn whisper. The two stared at each other.

"But I don't have to do anything with the coal," said Joseph, "and I am quite by myself."

"Oh, Joe!" That was all Lina said.

"Don't tell mother to-night," Joe added, after a moment's hesitation, "and when you do tell her, say it easy—not all at once, you

know. Just say that I have found something to do, and afterwards you can tell her that I have to go into the mine to do it. And Lina, I shall need an early breakfast, and I must carry a lunch."

Joe had a strange, new feeling as he rose before daylight the next morning, and putting on his oldest, roughest clothes, went down and took breakfast by lamplight.

"I am going to have my breakfast now, too," said Lina, sitting down opposite with cheeks uncommonly white. The two folded their hands and bowed their heads while they asked a silent blessing. Then Lina poured out the coffee. Not a word was spoken, and Lina wiped silent tears away behind the great coffee-pot.

"Lina, take a good look at me," said Joe, as he put his cap on. "To-night, I shall come home all black."

"Oh, Joe," cried Lina, breaking down at last, "what if something should happen to you?"

"Tell mother I'll be a good boy," said Joe, huskily, cramming the lunch into his pocket, and running out quickly into the frosty morning. Lina stood watching until he disappeared down the street. The sun had just finished lighting the great mountain in the distance, and was beginning to peep over into the damp, dark valley. Joe's eyes were on the ground, and his heart was so heavy that he thought he could feel it sinking down.

"I can give up," he said to himself, "I can go home yet."

But there was the empty purse, and his mother's flushed cheeks, and Lina's pale ones. Joe felt that he could meet anything better than these.

He began to run to keep his courage up, and on the way he passed a rough group of miner boys.

"Halloa! bubby," cried one of them, "does your mother know where you're going?"

Joe looked neither to the right nor left, and his feet flew over the ground. "They don't know where I'm going," thought he, "but they will know before night."

He hurried on to screen himself by a bend in the road, while he made his way up to the shaft. There was a man there whom he soon found to be the "inside" superintendent or "boss" as the miners called him. He directed the work that went on within the coal mine.

"Lookee here, little chap," he said, as Joe presented himself, "are you the one as is going to take Billy's place with the sprags?"

"I'm going to be a sprag boy, sir," returned Joseph.

"All right," returned the man, as he reached down a cap with an oil lamp for a front piece, "but look a-here now, that little roof of your'n aint the sort to go below with," and he replaced Joe's very respectable hat with the one in his hand.

"I reckon you haint never been down

afore," observed the man, as Joe bobbed his head uneasily under the new cap.

"Yes," said Joseph, "I went down once when I was a very little boy with my father."

"And did your father work in the mine, though?" continued the man, with some curiosity.

"No, sir," said Joseph, rather blankly, seeing that some further explanation would be expected. "He owned the coal mine," Joe added, and blushed with mortification that his father's son should wear a miner's hat.

"You aint old Ruff's son!" exclaimed the superintendent, staring.

"Mr. Ruff was my father," said Joseph, drawing himself up.

"Mr. Ruff, I mean—beg pardon," said the superintendent, looking quite dazed. "You don't tell me you're Ruff's son! Mr. Ruff, I should say—slip of the tongue. A better man never breathed. He was a splendid fellow, your father was: and so you're his son. Well, I declare! Once I'd never have

thought a boy of his could want for anything. Poor little chap, what's drove you here? This aint no place for such as you are."

"My mother is sick," said Joseph, who felt just then very much inclined to run home to her.

"Yes, yes," said the man, with a sympathizing grunt, "that's the way the thing works. Poverty and sickness, they always goes in company. Poor Ruff would have done better if he'd never put a dollar into this here coal mine; but it's all past and gone and he's dead, poor fellow, and you're his son." Saying this, the superintendent started forward and Joe followed.

They stood upon the edge of a black hole, so wide at the top that Joe could by no means jump across it, and so deep that he could by no means see the bottom of it. Joe shuddered as he looked down. The ropes creaked and groaned in the scaffolding overhead, and presently a dirty platform was

lifted into sight, and stopped at the surface of the ground. Joe and his guide stepped on. That seemed a long step to Joseph—out of day into night, out of the world with its pleasant sunshine and dear faces, into an unknown region full of all sorts of darkness. Slowly the platform began to sink, and the outward sights disappeared from view. The sides of this deep well into which Joe was descending were filled with moisture, which trickled out in little streams and fell upon the coal-begrimed platform and upon Joseph's clothing. As he felt himself sink deeper and deeper into this dreadful place, a terror seized him, and had it not been for fear of the big man at his side, I think Joseph would have cried out.

“Bless your little heart!” said the superintendent, with rough kindness, as he felt Joe grasp instinctively at his arm. Then came a sudden jar as the platform struck the bottom, and Joe strained his eyes in the darkness that was only made visible by the few rays

from his little lamp. As he stepped from the car he felt the rustling of straw beneath his feet, and his hand brushed across a hairy back. Two stupid eyes blinked at him, and Joe found himself in the stable of the mules—poor, patient things, who spent, perhaps, the whole of their dull lives in that dark place.

“I am better off than you,” thought Joseph, “for I can go up at night.”

Joe followed the superintendent through a long gallery, just wide enough to admit the little coal cars which ran through it on tracks, and so low in some places that Joseph could barely walk upright. There was a strong breeze blowing through it from the great fan at the top of the shaft, which was always kept moving to ventilate the mine. But how very dark it seemed, and how strangely Joseph felt as he crept along behind his guide! It seemed like death to be down there. He fancied that the low roof was shutting down upon him. How very far they were going from the shaft! Joe could

hear the click of pick-axes in the distance, and the sound reverberated strangely through the long passages. Then came a faint glimmer of light ahead, which resolved itself into several lights as they drew nearer—oil-lamps bobbing up and down with the caps of the miners who were toiling in the square excavation or coal chamber at the side of the gallery. They did not pause here, but went on up a short, steep ascent, at the top of which the gallery became wider. There was a little niche in the side as large as a closet. Here they stopped at last.

“Well, now, little fellow,” said the superintendent, pointing to a pile of sticks that lay in the corner, “these here is the sprags. What’s expected of you is to stand right here and keep wide awake. When you hear a coal-car coming along down the passage, catch up one of them sprags and have it all ready, and when the car goes by, stick it right through the spokes up agin the car side. That, you see, will stop the wheel from

turnin' round and keep the car from runnin' over the mule going down that there grade. Now you see what sprags is meant for, and you'd better look out right sharp if you're going to handle 'em. The little fellow that was here afore you had his leg broke in less than no time a gawpin about when he'd ought to been looking t'other way. The mule car run clean over him. When it comes time to quit work you'll hear the fellers hol-lerin' and runnin' through the gallery, and may be you can catch a ride on the last car. It's a good half mile back to the shaft. You see this gallery runs out under the hill, and I reckon we're pretty much under that there house on the terrace that used to be your father's. Well, good-bye, little man. If you keep up right chirk and have a sharp eye out there won't nothing hurt you."

With this parting injunction the superintendent turned and walked away down the passage. Half a mile underground with not a soul to help him! Suppose the lamp

should go out. Suppose he could never find his way back to daylight. A stifling terror seized Joseph. He could still hear the retreating echoes of his friend's footsteps, and he ran after him with all his might. But suppose a coal car should come by. Who would stand in his place and do his duty? This thought caused Joseph to turn back. He stood again trembling and irresolute at his post. Presently he heard the rumble of an approaching coal car. Joseph took up a sprag. Suppose he couldn't do it? But he would do it. His courage rose. He could hear the steps of the coming mule as it trotted along before its load. Joe made ready and thrust out boldly. The stick fitted and the wheel was caught.

"Helloa, spraggy," cried the big driver-boy, as he rode by with dangling legs on the rear corner of the coal car.

Joe straightened up and congratulated himself. He did not feel so much afraid now. Other cars passed at intervals, and Joe

became interested in his work. Still the day wore on slowly, and in the long silences between the loads a panic sometimes seized him. But then the lad thought of the little house up in the daylight, and remembered that his darkness and sorrow would keep the table spread and the fire burning.

So it came to pass that though the few rays of Joe's lamp lighted only a very little space, yet there was always a bright picture before him, and he came to know something of the reward that goes with duty and self-sacrifice.

"I had rather be down here working and feeling comfortable about *them*, than to be up there idle and looking down into this hole," he said, with a little shiver, as he listened for the next coal car.

It seemed as if years might have passed, when at last night came, and he laid the sprags down, and ran toward the shaft. He was jostled in the crowd, but no one appeared to take much notice of him, for which he

was thankful, and he slipped upon the platform quite unobserved. What a good thing the daylight seemed as he was lifted slowly into it. Joe stepped from the platform and blinked his unaccustomed eyes in the last rays of the sunset. He slipped away from the rest of the laborers and went to find his hat which the superintendent had taken from him in the morning. He felt very unwilling to walk along the streets and present himself at home under the miner's dreadful head-piece. The superintendent spied him prowling about among the shaft buildings.

"Look a here, little fellow," he called out, "did you manage to hold your own down there?"

Joe having assured his employer that he had held his own, was conducted to the office.

"I hung that hat of your'n agin' the wall," he said, as he reached it down. "You'd better not bring it another time."

"I want to wear it always," said Joe,

quickly taking off the miner's cap and laying it upon the table. The man frowned at first, and then his face softened :

"It's right you should," he said, kindly; "and you can keep your lamp-hat here; mind you don't ever leave it lying around outside, for the fellows might run off with it."

Joe thanked the superintendent for his kindness, and set off toward home. He was very thankful for the friendly twilight which veiled the dusky streaks upon his hands and face. Quietly he slipped through the gate and round to the kitchen-door. Lina ran to meet him.

"Oh, Joe," she cried, peering eagerly into his face, as though she expected to find some great transformation. "Did you have to work hard, and did you get frightened?" she asked.

"No," returned Joe, with rather a disdainful accent. "There was nothing to do—and what was to frighten me?"

"Well, you don't look bad," she continued, examining his features critically. "Those streaks will all wash off, I am sure; and, Joseph, can you fix yourself up nicely and go in to see mother? She has had such a fever all day. I told her the best I knew how, but right away she began to grow worse."

Joseph retired to his room, and after awhile came down again, wearing not a trace of his occupation.

"Don't you look nice, though?" exclaimed Lina. "I'm so glad you changed your clothes."

Mrs. Ruff could not say much, but she smiled when her son entered the room. Somehow his smooth, fair face and unsoiled garments seemed to dispel a feverish illusion that had been haunting her.

"Be good, my boy," she said, as Joe kissed her and went away to his supper.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARGUMENT OF BLOWS.

“WHEN a fellow hits me,” said a boy to his Sunday-school teacher, “I’m always bound to hit back.”

This principle, it is to be feared, forms a part of the code of honor, or action rather, of many a boy who sits on Sunday and listens to the beautiful precepts of the Sermon on the Mount.

“But you must love your enemies,” says the teacher.

The boy shakes his head.

“If I don’t pay ’em back,” he says, “they’ll keep on a-hittin’ me.”

It was not long before our sprag boy found an opportunity to test his fighting principles. He went early to the shaft the next morning, so as to avoid falling in company with the jolly groups of miners, toward

whom he cherished a deep dislike and dread. A small boy issued from a side street, and walked directly before him. The grimy miner's clothes hung loosely about his demure little figure, which was crowned and overshadowed by the miner's hat. Joe hastened and overtook him.

"Do you work in the mine?" he asked, feeling a kind of sympathy for this little son of labor.

"Yes," returned the boy, in a half frightened whisper.

The two boys trudged on silently together for Joe's new friend seemed not inclined to sustain the conversation.

"What do you do?" asked Joe at last.

"I'm a spraggy," said the little boy, under his breath.

"Why, so am I," said Joe, cheerfully. "We should be friends."

The little boy lifted his eyes with a pleased expression.

"What is your name?" Joe continued.

"John Raney," replied the little boy; "and I live with my granny in the little red house under the hill."

By this time the lads had reached the mine, and they went down together. Joe saw his new friend run away through a passage which branched out from the main one, and he soon stopped at the top of a little hill. "That must be where he works," Joe reflected. "I wish we were nearer."

He felt much cheered as he trudged through the dark gallery, because there was one person to whom his heart went out in sympathy.

"Poor little soul," thought Joseph, "he is just like me. He don't belong down here with the rough fellows, and I mean to try and comfort him." As for the rest of the miners, the roistering, rollicking set, who, in Joseph's estimation, did belong down there, what had he, with his gentle birth and breeding, to do with such as they? No impulse of loving kindness warmed his heart toward

these rough, uncultivated laborers. He would never go near them, or even speak to them. So when the great driver-boys rode bawling by, Joseph did not answer their rough salutations, but stood stiff, silent, and uncompromising, with his sprags. All this did not pass unnoticed in the darkness, and that night when Joseph came out of the mine and hurried away to exchange his hat in the office, he was followed by a derisive laugh.

"There goes the little gentleman," cried a boy with a big mouth and wide shovel teeth. "We and him aint made out of the same dust."

Joe loitered at the office till the crowd had dispersed a little, and then made his escape without being further molested. All the way home Joe's fists doubled themselves up threateningly, and there was a declaration of war in his heart. In such a state of mind he was not sorry that little John Raney had gone on before him, out of sight.

"I'll teach them to hoot at me," he mut-

tered. "Do they know who I am? Do they know who my father was? Do they know that I took every prize at school, and am prepared for the academy? If they don't look out, they'll find what I'm made of." With this dire threat Joe came in sight of the house. Then his heart began to soften, and presently he forgot his animosities in Lina's affectionate greeting, and reports about his mother, who was perhaps a little better—certainly not worse. This was the great reward that came at the end of each dark day, as Joseph went on with his labor—the comfortable table, and the bright fire burning at home! He sat a long while with his mother that evening, and talked a great deal about the mine, and what went on there; but he neglected to mention to her the grudge that was growing up in his heart.

The next morning Joseph was up and off as usual, and he overtook little John Raney on the way to his work. This time John was more loquacious, and confided to Joe

that he was afraid of the big boys, though they had never hurt him, and that he was often very lonesome down in the mine.

“It’s a pity I am not near enough to cheer you up,” said Joseph; “but never mind, we can see each other nights and mornings; and as for those big boys, don’t you be frightened; the first fellow that dares lay a hand on you when I am about, will find himself doubled up mighty sudden.” Joe clenched his teeth and hands savagely, and little John gazed at him with gratitude and wonder.

The day did not pass very pleasantly in the coal mine. Some of the driver-boys jeered at Joseph as they drove by, and our sprag boy, nursed his wrath. Joe considered them all his natural enemies; and I suspect that when he came up from the mine that night, and walked through the group about the shaft a good deal of his opinion could have been read in his face and manner. It is certain that no very friendly looks were cast after him as he disappeared in the office.

“Shouldn’t wonder if we’d have to take that there fellow down a little,” observed the boy with the big teeth, who was known as Dick Fraley.

“Hulloa, fellows,” cried somebody in the crowd; “here’s little John Spraggy;” and Joe looked out at the window, and saw his little friend just setting out for home.

The crowd took up the jeer, though no one molested the little fellow. But Joseph, swelling with the pride of insulted dignity, marched boldly out to the rescue; and upon his appearance the crowd sent up another shout.

“Here comes the little gentleman. Hurrah for Priggy! Priggy and Spraggy!” they cried, as he took a stand beside little John; “and hurrah for Priggy’s hat!”

If Joseph had only turned and smiled good-naturedly at these young savages, if he had only shown some sign of friendliness and forbearance, he might have gained a victory. But Joseph was angry, and he turned upon

the crowd with an expression of scornful wrath.

"Smash his hat," some one called out angrily, and the crowd closed about him with lowering faces.

"He wants to fight, does he!" said Dick Fraley; and just then some one jostled Joseph.

"I'll teach you to let me alone," cried Joe, turning suddenly upon the offender, and lifting his hand.

I had best not tell all that followed. How the first blow was struck, and the crowd fell back and cheered while the two young combatants closed upon each other and struggled like wild tigers.

Who would have suspected Joe's gentle blood and breeding then? At the first onset poor little John Raney ran crying down the hill, and nobody noticed or cared particularly; but from the opposite direction there came, blustering and gesticulating, a person in whose movements every one seemed vitally concerned.

“It’s the ‘boss’!” exclaimed Dick Fraley, and the crowd with one consent took to its heels. The combatants, thus left to settle for themselves the point of victory, looked up with their bloody faces, and, seeing the approaching danger, fled away in opposite directions, while the superintendent called after them in stentorian accents: “Look a’ here, you young rascals, I’ll have this stopped.”

Alas! what a truth had Joseph learned in these last fifteen minutes! He had found that one may fall to lower depths than the bottom of a coal mine—that there may be worse stains upon the garments than the grime of honest labor.

He crept away to a corner and wiped the blood from his hands and face. He, Joseph Ruff, a scholar and the son of a gentleman, had given and received blows from a common miner! How he had been accustomed to despise the noisy brawls which he sometimes witnessed from his mother’s window!

Could it be possible that he had struck the first blow in a common street fight? With one step how low he had sunk himself!

Night was coming on, and every moment of absence would increase the alarm at home; but what could he say to his mother and sister about the long cut in his cheek, or about his black eye? In wretchedness and despair, Joseph fell upon his knees and tried to put up some words of prayer.

Some one came up and paused behind him. Joe sprang to his feet.

"I say now, hold on a minute," said a voice that Joe recognized as Dick Fraley's. "I wont touch you," continued the boy, approaching, for Joseph began to edge away. "I never hits a fellow when he's down, but I say now, if the boss hadn't come up, may be you might have beat."

Joseph was silent.

"Anyhow you had as good a chance as Billy. I say you two was even matched, and so says the rest of the fellows."

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"I'm sorry that I was drawn into the fight," said Joseph, stiffly. "I am not in the habit of fighting."

"Well, you did first-rate, seeing as you wasn't used to it. Us fellows was surprised to see you hold your own."

"I am not in the habit of fighting," Joseph repeated.

"Well, I reckon you'll get used to it afore you've worked along of us a great while. Fellows has got to fight in these here diggin's, especially them as puts on as many airs as you do."

With this parting observation, Dick Fraley turned into a cross street, and Joseph went on his way alone.

An hour ago he would have scorned the thought that one of these miners could in any way influence him. Yet this conversation affected a certain change in Joseph's feelings. So strong is the power of evil and the downward tendency of our hearts.

"I did do well to hold my own," reflected

Joseph, "and the fellows will see that I know what I am about. After all, I don't see how I could be blamed for fighting. I was obliged to assert myself, or I should have been run over."

There was a little stir among the bushes at the road side, and John Raney's straight little form appeared in the dark.

"Oh, Joey," he exclaimed, sobbing, "be you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt much," said Joseph. "Poor little soul, how came you here?"

"The big boys chased me down the hill, but I waited here for you," said faithful little John.

"Run home, there's a good boy," said Joseph, who somehow did not care to show his disfigurements to such youthful eyes. Joseph went on to his own gate, which shut with a click, and walked briskly up the path past the house. Lina's face was pressed against the window, but as soon as she saw her brother she ran to meet him.

"Oh, Joe, we have been so frightened!" she exclaimed, opening the door.

"I expected you would be," said Joseph. "I have been hindered."

Lina gave a little scream, as the light fell upon her brother's face; and Joseph, by way of explanation, said first that a fellow had hit him; and then, under the stress of Lina's cross questionings, that he had hit a fellow.

"You have been in a fight then, brother," observed Lina, after some deliberation.

"I was obliged to defend myself," said Joseph, in self justification.

After supper was over, and Lina had made a preliminary visit of explanation to Mrs. Ruff's room, Joseph, bandaged and patched up as decently as possible, presented himself before his mother. She motioned him to a seat close by her, and put her hand in his. At first, Joseph was not inclined to give a connected account of the occurrence. He said that the people about the mine were very rough, and it was necessary to give them a

lesson ; but by degrees all the circumstances came out, one after another ; how the boys had jeered and he had nursed his wrath toward them.

“ You did not try peacemaking, my son,” said his mother.

“ Peacemaking is of no use with them, mother,” said Joseph. “ What they respect is pluck. I think I have taught them a lesson, for the very worst fellow told me afterwards that I did well to hold my own.”

“ You might have taught them a better lesson,” said his mother, gravely. “ You have used their common argument of blows. Ah, Joseph,” she continued, sadly, “ you have been used to a higher aim in life than the approval of the worst fellow and the victory in a street fight !”

“ Do you think I can stand still and let them knock my hat off ?” asked Joseph, in an injured tone.

“ I think,” said his mother, “ that a brave Christian gentleman would not need to fight

about his hat. I think that a Christian boy, sent by his Father in heaven to work in a coal mine, would try and bring some light into the darkness about him. I think he would not despise and hate the people among whom he labored, and let them read it in his face."

"I never did a thing to hurt them until to-day," exclaimed Joseph, indignantly.

"Oh, yes, you did," said his mother, gently. "You hurt their feelings, and that is the worst sort of a hurt. When you walked through the crowd with your head high and your lips pressed together, you said that you felt yourself to be better than they, as plainly as though you had used words. No wonder they called names after you. It was the way they took to assert their self-respect. Who knows but our Father in heaven meant to send a blessing to them, as well as to your mother and sister, when he took away all your pleasant prospects and put you down in the mine? It is

sad that you have so soon sunk to their level, and given and received blows and a bloody face."

Joseph hung his head in shame.

"What would you do if you were in my place, mother?" he asked, quite humbly. "Would you wear your miner's hat home?"

"No," replied his mother, "for I think you have a right to exercise your own taste in the matter of hats. I would not submit to an injustice, but I think I would try and treat those miners as if they were my brothers, and then I am sure I should not have much trouble about their treatment of me."

"You don't know about bad boys, mother," said Joe, incredulously.

"I think I do," said Mrs. Ruff, "but if not, I am sure our Saviour understood all about them when he gave the rule for returning good for evil. I am sure he would not have taught us any but the best way for treating our enemies."

"Well, said Joseph, in a softened voice,

"what would you do if you were in my place?"

Mrs. Ruff reflected a moment.

"First of all," she answered, speaking slowly, "I would pray earnestly to God to make me humble and give me the right sort of feeling toward these people. I would ask to be made brave and patient, and I would never lift my hand against them to strike a blow, but I would try to find out some way of doing them good."

Joseph did not think it would be at all easy to follow the plan which his mother marked out, but before he left her he promised not to resort to blows again, and I am sure he did not retire to rest that night without a sincere prayer for direction. It may have been a brief prayer, and a very weak and insufficient one, but I believe Jesus heard it, because he always hears what comes from the contrite heart, and I think he gave Joseph more strength and better courage than he asked for.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER ARGUMENT.

JOSEPH must have felt like a soldier, starting on a very difficult and dangerous campaign, when he stepped out the next morning into the frosty air. The enemy might use fists, or possibly brick-bats, and he was to meet them with good will and Christian forbearance, two weapons which he was not quite certain he would be able to use. But he did not know as he went forward that his mother had compassed him about with all the protecting influences of a night of prayer. Joe earnestly hoped to make his way into the mine without being observed. His black eye and enlarged nose were a humiliating disadvantage, and he had a strong feeling that since the last night's contest was left undecided, his boisterous companions would expect another fight.

A sudden turn in the road brought him almost face to face with a considerable number of the enemy, who were advancing down a cross street, shouting and swinging their tin dinner-pails. Joe turned pale and hesitated, but the crowd fell in behind him.

"Hurrah for the little gentleman," shouted somebody.

The hot blood mounted to Joseph's cheeks and his hands began to clench. Then his mother's face seemed to appear before him, reminding him of his promise and all that was at stake. Perhaps a glimpse of his own distorted nose helped to keep him humble. At any rate he struggled bravely with his rising anger. "I must not fight," he said to himself as he walked on quietly. The crowd were disappointed. They missed the daring manner which the day before had provoked them to battle.

"Look a here, young man," said a threatening voice close at Joe's elbow, "you aint allowed to wear that kind of a bonnet."

Joe turned suddenly and faced the enemy. What a sea of scowling faces surrounded him! He felt his danger, but he had prayed for help in this emergency and so help came.

"I don't see why I shouldn't wear my own hat," he said, in a voice so quiet and full of good-natured firmness as to surprise even himself.

The crowd did not seem to know why either, and they began to move on slowly.

"Shouldn't wonder if that little fellow's airs was all licked out of him," observed one of the miners.

Here was Joe's opportunity. Should he neglect it?

"Fellows," he said, speaking out bravely, "I am going to wear this hat because I like it best, but I hope the 'airs' are all out of me, and I should like to be friends with you."

The crowd were silent—all but one impudent little miner who called out "Priggy," in rather an uncertain voice.

"Take that," said Dick Fraley, giving the offender a kick.

They all walked on in silence. Joe felt rather awkward. So, no doubt did the rest of the miners. They were none of them sorry to reach the shaft. When Joe had gone below, his late enemies held a consultation to consider what they should do with him.

Yesterday, they had decided to lick him, but the case was altered now. They did not exactly like to "lick" a boy who had publicly acknowledged a fault and asked for their friendship. They had never before known a case like that.

"Let him wear his hat if he wants to," spoke up somebody. "Who cares!"

"Anybody as fights him 'll fight me too," observed Dick Fraley, looking about him with determination.

Nobody expressed any intention to fight Dick Fraley, and so the crowd broke up. Away down in his dark corner of the coal

mine, our sprag boy offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for victory, and all that day he felt near to God. Joe took care to be home in good season that evening.

"You must pray to be kept always humble and trustful," said his mother, when he had told her all that had happened.

"I don't think the boys will trouble me much, any more, mother," said Joseph. "Dick Fraley walked part of the way home with me to-night, and he seemed real good."

"You must keep on feeling true kindness for them," said his mother, "that is the only safe rule."



CHAPTER VIII.

A PLAN WITH A BAD ENDING.

AS Joe became accustomed to his work and performed it with greater ease, he found that the time dragged very heavily in the mine. In the dreary intervals between the coal cars, there were no sights but the long lengths of darkness stretching away beyond the glimmer of his little lamp, and no sounds but the faint shouts of the driver boys or the click of the pickaxes. So Joseph was driven in upon his own thoughts for diversion. Sometimes he beguiled the hours with recollections of what he had learned in the school-room. He recalled the old stories of the classic mythology about gods and goddesses, and the wonderful exploits of old demi-gods and heroes.

Sometimes he peopled the air about him with fanciful creatures. The dark mine was

Vulcan's work-shop. The great fire kept always burning under the air-shaft was the mighty forge where the thunderbolts were hammered out, and the miners whom he sometimes saw moving about far down the passages, were the Cyclops, Vulcan's work-men, with the lamp burning like a great eye in the middle of their foreheads. These thoughts brought back the love of learning which had been Joseph's ruling ambition, and one day a happy plan suggested itself to him. Why not bring a book down there and study by the light of his lamp? So Joseph brought his beloved Virgil, and a great lexicon which he had commissioned Lina to buy for him from his own money.

He made a strong-box on which he placed a padlock, and set it in a dark corner of his little niche to contain his treasured books. What a star of hope began to rise again in his horizon! What a heroic sort of thing he was doing, climbing out of that dark pit along the lines of knowledge! Some

day that knowledge would become a power. Some day he would burst into the world again. Like the water-lily, that sends up a long living stem through the dark stifling slime, and floats its white flower in the sunshine, so he, having toiled and climbed upward, would at last unfold the fair blossom of his success under the benign influences of the upper light. Inspired with this hope, Joseph patiently dug out the roots of the troublesome verbs and followed the course of the "*pius Æneas*" through storm and shipwreck. But his ear always caught the first rumble of the approaching coal-car, and the sprag was always ready.

Thus matters went on smoothly for several weeks. Joe's days no longer dragged heavily. They stood now to him, not for so many hours of monotonous darkness, but for so many lines of translation, and every page that he turned seemed to bring nearer the hour of his liberation; for, he said to himself, "I shall prepare myself for college in this

dark place. Mother is getting better, and I shall lay up something from my wages, and perhaps I may enter college next year."

But there was a harsh awakening from these pleasant dreams. Joseph could never explain exactly how it happened; but one day while he was trying to sort out the different parts of a sentence which he could in nowise put together, he was suddenly overtaken in his meditations. There was a crash, a yell, and a spectacle of destruction, in which he saw a mule lying at the bottom of the hill, kicking against the broken coal-car, whose load was scattered far and near. What a gathering there was of the miners, and what loud oaths poisoned the close, dark galleries! Joe stood by like one in a dream, while they lifted the broken car from the poor suffering animal, whose groans filled Joseph's heart with remorse. Then the "boss" came up. There was the sharp report of a pistol, and the poor mule groaned no longer. They lifted his dead body upon a coal car, and

cleared away the rubbish. Then the "boss" came and flared his lamp full upon Joseph. Neglect at the post of duty! Ah me, there could be no other verdict! It was all to be read in Joe's guilty tell-tale face. There lay the books, too—the Virgil and the Latin lexicon. There was not much mercy in the master's voice as he said:

"Them things has no business in this coal mine. Take 'em up to-night, young man, and let me never hear no more of 'em. You've neglected your duty." So the strong box with the padlock was lifted into daylight, and Joseph carried it home.

After this the days in the coal mine seemed longer and darker than ever. Joseph had a sensitive nature, and it was a solemn thing to him to have brought death even to a mule. Then there was the sense of self-condemnation that came with the neglect of duty. He had failed even in being a sprag boy. It seemed that he was to fail in everything. Worst of all was the baffled, powerless feel-

ing that overwhelmed him. He had struggled upon the edge of a pit, and been cast into it. He had tried to lift himself out, but he was thrown back again.

One morning Joe found in his corner a pile of rough sticks such as sprags are made from, and with them a hatchet. These were to keep him "out of mischief," so the messenger said that brought them. Henceforth he was to use all his spare time in making sprags. Joseph worked at them doggedly. He was discouraged, and just then thought he did not care much what ever became of him. As he was reflecting one day upon the hopelessness of his situation, he heard foot-falls along the gallery and saw a light. The "boss" was coming, but he had some one with him. Joseph listened to the voice, and his heart leaped. In another minute his hand was clasped in Mr. Macaffie's warm grasp.

"How did you ever think of coming to see me?" asked Joseph, gratefully, after the

superintendent's footsteps had died away again in the distance. This sudden appearance seemed to him like the visit of an angel.

"Well, my dear boy," said the old man, "I think a great deal about you and pray a great deal for you, and I thought perhaps the face of a friend might cheer you up. How does it fare with you, my son?"

Joseph told him all from the beginning, not forgetting the fight with the miner-boys and the next day's bloodless victory, and more than once he was interrupted by a fervent "Thank God!"

"Well," said Mr. Macaffie, at last, when Joe had finished his story, "so making sprags is your present mission?"

"Yes," said Joseph, as he hewed patiently upon a stick.

"God put you in prison, and you could not climb out on your ladder of Latin books?"

"No," said Joseph.

"And so you must wait until God puts down a ladder for you," continued Mr. Macaffie. "That's the way the Bible Joseph did. I don't suppose it's any darker here than it was in his prison."

"There is no use in my trying to do anything," said Joseph. "I don't know what God wants of me."

"Why, yes, you do," returned Mr. Macaffie, cheerfully; "he wants you to make sprags."

"Nothing but make sprags!" echoed Joseph in disconsolate tones.

"Making sprags to the glory of God is a grand business, my boy," said Mr. Macaffie. "You must do it diligently, as Joseph did his prison work; and then, if you patiently wait, you'll find it one of God's steps to lead you up to something higher."

"It's so hard to wait," said Joseph.

"It is hard to wait on your own plans and efforts because they are uncertain, but it is not hard to wait on God," said Mr. Macaffie.

“Why, Joseph, your Father in heaven has a plan for you; you did not fall into this pit by chance. Don’t you suppose he knows how lonely and discouraged you feel down here?—and don’t you suppose he wants to take you out? But there is something for you to learn here which perhaps you couldn’t be taught in any other place. I don’t know exactly what it is, and perhaps you don’t now; but you will know some day if you are obedient, and then you will see how good God is. It is a great privilege to have your own plans broken up so early in life, and to be thrown so entirely into God’s hands. Some men go through long lives of struggle and disappointment, and only find out God’s way at the very end.”

“I don’t like to live without any plan,” said Joseph, doggedly.

“My dear boy,” responded Mr. Macaffie, earnestly, “as soon as you have really and wholly given up your will and your life into God’s hands, you will have plans.”

There was a deep silence, and I doubt not Joseph was asking himself, over and over, whether he had given himself up to work out God's plans.

"Isn't there some missionary work that you might do about here?" asked Mr. Macaffie, after a little. "Don't you know of any boys to whom you might carry the glad tidings of salvation?"

"There are plenty of boys that don't know much about Christ," said Joseph, "but I haven't any influence over them."

"Don't you know anybody?" persisted Mr. Macaffie.

"There is John Raney," said Joe thoughtfully, "and Dick Fraley—I know them."

"Well, can't you carry the gospel to them?" urged the gentleman. "Two souls would be well worth a lifetime of labor."

"I'll try," said Joseph; and then the conversation was interrupted, for the superintendent came to conduct Mr. Macaffie back to daylight. Joseph felt that he had been

lifted up and strengthened, as he bade his dear friend good-bye. He reflected upon Mr. Macaffie's counsels all that day, and as he meditated he began to take more pains with the sprags.

"It doesn't matter," he said to himself. "A rough sprag will hold as well as a smooth one. Nobody will ever see whether they are hewed even or not; but it's my business. God has given me plenty of time to do it, and I mean to make the very nicest sprags that I can."

So he hewed the points off smooth and even, and the work was a comfort to him, though he knew the sticks would only be thrown carelessly down in the dark.

Joe also thought a great deal of the promise he had made concerning the two boys—Dick Fraley and John Raney. How should he approach them? Would not Dick laugh if he were to say anything about religion?

Joe made a little prayer, asking God to show him an opportunity; but several days

passed, and no opportunity came. The miner boys let Joseph alone for the most part now-a-days. They seldom called names after him, and he went to and from his work undisturbed.

All this might be very well, but Joe now began to wish for a little closer acquaintance with his late enemies. Since the Latin books, and the bright dreams and hopes that went with them, had vanished from the coal mine, Joe had much time for meditation, and he began to think more and more about the people around him. They were his brethren. They had the same Father in heaven, and they knew so little about Him! Joe wished that he could tell them something more.

Little John Raney had not been at the shaft for a number of days, so he could not speak even to him, but Joe fell in with Dick Fraley one night on the way home.

"Do you ever go to Sunday-school?" asked Joseph, speaking quite at a venture.

"Oh, glory!" returned Dick, "what's to take me there?"

Joe looked at Dick's black face, with its heavy, half-slumbering expression, and then up into the beautiful sky where great banks of fleecy clouds were piled up like thrones, and tinged with the rich colors of the sunset.

"Oh Dick," he exclaimed, "I wouldn't say 'glory.'"

"That's nothin'," returned Dick. "Glory's nothin' to what I say sometimes. 'Taint swearin'?" he continued, looking at Joseph with some curiosity.

"Well, I don't know," returned Joe, doubtfully. "Glory belongs to God, and when you said it I looked up into the sky, and it made me think of something."

"Tell us what it was," suggested Dick, looking interested.

"I know that heaven is full of glory," continued Joseph, "and I always think that it would look something like beautiful clouds

if it was seen at a distance ; and I was thinking how dreadful it would be if, when we die, we were to catch just a glimpse of heaven, and then be sent away into darkness. So I don't think we ought to say 'glory' carelessly, because some day it will mean so much to us."

Joe felt fairly frightened when he had finished this speech, and he walked on without looking into the face of his companion. There was such a long silence that he felt sure he had offended him hopelessly. At length Dick broke the silence abruptly.

"Do you remember the night you got licked ?"

"Yes," returned Joe, much surprised.

"Do you remember how the boss came up, and the fellows all skipped, and you stopped down there by the railroad track, and it was most dark, and I came up to you ?"

"Yes," said Joseph, wondering what would come next.

“Well, what was you a-doin’, kneelin’ down by that there log?”

Joe started and flushed. “I was trying to pray,” he said, in a low voice.

There was another long silence. Joe was agitated. The opportunity had come, and he was not ready for it. What, after all, could such a sinful and weak boy as he do for another? It was Dick who broke the silence.

“Now look a here,” said he, “I’ve never prayed a prayer in my life.”

“Wouldn’t you like to?” asked Joe, faintly.

“I would if I knowed how,” returned Dick; and just then they came to the corner, and separated for the night.

Joe’s heart smote him all the way home. “Dick would have been a great deal better than I, if he had been brought up in my home,” he said to himself. “I did not know he was that kind of a boy. I thought he despised praying.” Joe confessed to himself

that he had been ashamed of being found upon his knees. "I am not good enough to teach other people," he said, as he opened the gate, and went through the yard into the house. But all the evening he could not put out of his mind the boy who would like to pray, but didn't know how. Since his mother was so much better, and sitting up in her chair, he could not help telling her about it, and asking her what she thought he could do. Mrs. Ruff listened attentively to the end of the story.

"I think you could give Dick a Bible," she said, at last, "and point out the chapters that speak about Jesus. He needs to hear that first."

"I am so bad myself, mother," said Joseph, "I am ashamed to talk to any one about being good."

"But you do not need to say, 'Look at me, Dick, and see what *I* am,'" said his mother. "You are to say, 'Look at Christ.' Ah! Joseph, would you not like to take the

name of Jesus with you down into that dark coal mine? Would you not like the poor, sorrowful miners to see the King in his beauty?" Joseph was very thoughtful.

"Do you think we have any Bible that we could spare?" he asked.

"I think we have," said Mrs. Ruff, and Lina and Joseph went to look. They found an English edition with plain print, and Joe wrapped it in a paper. The next morning he watched for Dick Fraley, and met him just at the shaft.

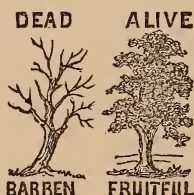
"Here is something I brought you," he said, handing him the package. "It will tell you about praying."

Dick tore the paper off, but he looked disappointed. "I ain't much at readin'," he said, "and I don't set no store by books." Joe, too, felt disappointed, but both hurried away to their work.

"I wonder if I couldn't read some to him," thought Joseph. All day he considered the matter as he worked at his sprag-making.

"I wonder if Dick wouldn't come over to the shaft on Sunday afternoon, and hear me read a little. There are plenty of places round there where we could sit down." Joe broached the subject to Dick that night on the way home.

"I don't know nothin' to hinder," said Dick Fraley. "If you've a mind to be there, shouldn't wonder if I'd come."



CHAPTER IX.

A BIBLE READING.

WHEN Sunday afternoon came, it was not without trepidation that Joe bade his sister good-bye at the shaft, while she went on to Sunday-school.

"Tell Mr. Macaffie why I did not come, Lina," he said, "and if I don't find Dick, I'll hurry on and overtake you."

Joe felt almost sorry for a moment that he had undertaken the Bible reading. He shrank from meeting Dick alone in this deserted place. There was a shed built against the hill-side, close by some trestle-work. Here Joe spied his friend, sunning himself on a bench. Dick blinked his eyes slowly as he watched Joe climb up the hill.

"I'm a waitin' for you," he said calmly, as Joe at last presented himself flushed and panting

"Are you?" said Joe, with a degree of embarrassment. Joe had an idea that he ought to preface his reading with some sort of good advice. He thought he ought to praise Dick for coming, and tell him how much better it was than wandering about with idle companions; but the words died upon his lips, and he stood abashed before Dick's look of quiet expectation. Dick was not troubled with self-consciousness, or any rigid notions of politeness. When Joe looked for a place to sit down, he never once thought of lifting his great boots from the bench which he monopolized.

"I guess I shall have to stand up and read," said Joseph, with an embarrassed laugh.

"I seen a keg lying outside," observed the miner-boy, with frank unconcern.

Joe went and brought the keg, and established himself upon it beside Dick.

"This is a Bible," said Joseph.

"I know it. I seen 'em before."

"Where would you like to have me read?" asked Joseph, turning the leaves over.

"It don't make no odds," returned his companion. "I reckon one place is as good as another."

"Well, I'll read about the Saviour," said Joseph, turning to Matthew. "You know about Jesus?"

"I've heard of him," said Dick, nodding appreciatively, "born a-Christmas. Me and my sister went to a Christmas-tree once at some church."

Joe commenced, and Dick listened closely.

"I've heard some of that before," he said, when the chapter was finished.

"Now I'll read the Sermon on the Mount," said Joseph, turning the leaves over again. "Christ preached it, and it tells how people ought to live. He was sitting upon the side of a mountain, and a great many people came and listened to him. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' read Joseph, 'Blessed are they that mourn.'"

Dick was very quiet until the end of the chapter. Joe paused a little when it was finished.

"I mourn," said Dick, quietly.

"Why?" asked Joe, greatly surprised.

"Oh, because it's so dark in the mine, and there is so much fightin', and I don't know where I'm goin' to after I die."

"Why, I thought you liked to fight, Dick," said Joseph, with some hesitation.

"Well, maybe I do like hittin' a blow now and then when my blood's up. I likes to give fellows their dues; but it's a dreadful dark way of livin'. Seems as though I'd like to give up knucklin' my way along, sometimes. May be you wouldn't think it, but when I die I'd like to go to that glory you was a-tellin' about. I haint said that word once since. I reckon my ma is up there now, for she used to learn me a little prayer before she died. It was a great while ago, and I disremember what the prayer said."

"Well, I know a prayer," said Joseph, encouragingly, "and I will teach it to you. If you pray to Jesus he will help you."

"Would He take me out of the coal mine, you s'pose?" asked Dick.

"I don't know," said Joe, slowly, while his own sad lot rose before him; "but I'm sure He will take you to heaven when you die, if you love Him and obey Him."

"Well, that'll do," said Dick. "I'd be satisfied if I was sure of that. Now, give us your prayer."

Joseph kneeled reverently, and repeated the Lord's prayer, Dick following him laboriously. This they did several times.

"Now I'll say another," said Joseph. "Oh, God," he began, reverently, "please comfort Dick Fraley"—here his voice faltered—"and take him to heaven when he dies."

Dick whispered, "Amen." Both boys rose from their knees.

"You can use any words, you know. God always hears."

Dick nodded.

"Now I must go," said Joseph. "Won't you keep the Bible?"

Dick shook his head. "I ain't good at readin'," he said, "and some of the fellows might catch it up and tear it. But I'll be around again next Sunday for to hear you read."

"And, Dick, you must be sure to pray this week," said Joseph.

"I'll try it," said the miner boy, as he swung down the hill.

What a strange thing Joseph felt it to be, that he, who was scarcely sure he had found the Saviour himself, should be trying to lead another boy to Him.

"Dick is better than I am," he said, as he recalled all his bright hopes for the world, and how he had struggled to keep them. Dick would be satisfied to live in the coal mine all his life, if he could have heaven at last. Joe shuddered. He could not bear to look through a long life of darkness, even to

see heaven in the distance. He felt that he must have some of the brightness upon earth.

"I am not fit to teach Dick anything," said Joseph that evening to his mother, "I can only read the Bible to him."

"And you can pray," said his mother, "that the Word may enter his heart."

Little John Raney was back at the mine again on Monday. He had been kept at home by sickness. Joe invited him to come to the Bible reading. So on the next Sunday there were two listeners instead of one.

"Say we call this here thing a Sunday-school," said Dick Fraley, when they had gone through their simple exercise of reading.

"Well, say we do," replied Joseph.

"But we haint had no singin'," interposed John Raney, in his thin, little voice.

"That's true," said Joseph. "Do you know anything?"

"I know 'Round the Throne,'" said little John.

"Let's sing it," said Dick. So they all joined in, but they could not keep together, and they soon stopped.

"Now shall we say 'Our Father?'" asked Joseph; so they all kneeled together and repeated it over and over. Then Joe made a little prayer of his own, asking God to bless them and all the other miners.

"We might get some other fellows to come," suggested Dick, as they rose from their knees. "What's the use of prayin' for folks and not do nothin' for 'em?"

"If we had a place," said Joe, thoughtfully. "It's too cold any way for John Raney in this shed. Well, boys, perhaps I'll think up some way before next Sunday," said Joseph, as he bade them good-bye.

To tell the truth, Joe had thought of a way already. An idea came into his head while he was standing there. "Why not ask the superintendent to let them use his office? There was not much of value in it, and the desk could be locked." What an audacious

suggestion! Who would think of asking such a favor of the superintendent? Who would dare to be the one to do it? Joe said he should not. And yet he kept thinking of it all Sunday and all Monday, and at last he told his mother about it. She encouraged him to ask the favor, rather than to miss the opportunity of doing good. So Joe screwed his courage up and went to the shaft a quarter of an hour earlier than usual one morning. He did not forget to pray before starting, and I think he had to pray all the way there to keep his heart from failing. Joe walked straight up to the superintendent's desk.

"Sir," he said, "could I speak with you a minute?"

"What's now?" said the man, gruffly.

"Well," said Joseph, gulping down his confusion, "I read the Bible Sunday afternoons to Dick Fraley and John Raney, and we want to ask some other boys; but there isn't room enough, and besides the wind blows so in the shed."

"Was them Bibles you had down there when you smashed the coal-car?" asked the man, eying Joe closely.

"No, sir," said Joe flushing, "those were Latin books."

"What do you want to read the Bible to them boys for?" asked the man, after a pause.

"Because it will make them happier," said Joseph, hesitating.

"But that won't do you any good," said the man.

Joe hesitated again. He was a very faint-hearted Christian as yet. He was afraid to say that he was trying to serve his Master.

"What do you want me to do about it?" continued the superintendent. "You don't expect me to build a meetin'-house, do you?"

"No," said Joseph, with half a smile, "but this is it. I wanted to ask if you would let us come into your office. I hope you won't be angry with me, sir, for speaking about it."

There was an impressive silence.

"Nobody never asked me for anything like that before, since I've been here," said the superintendent, shaking his head. There was nothing angry in his tones, and Joe dared to take courage.

"I'm sure we should be very careful not to hurt anything," he began, eagerly, but the man cut him short.

"That's easy enough promised, boy," he said, with a wave of the hand that dismissed Joe from the office. Joseph gave up all hope, but when he passed the door a few minutes later on the way to his work, the superintendent called out to him :

"I'll see about that there thing you spoke to me about. I'll let you know the last of the week."

So Joe was encouraged to hope, and on Saturday afternoon he received the office key, with the stipulation that there should be no "goings on." Joe thanked the superintendent and promised great decorum, after which he hastened away to tell Dick Fraley. Dick

invited a number of boys of his acquaintance, and Joe gave John Raney notice of the new place of meeting.

Joe's tongue ran very fast after he reached home. "We may have a dozen, mother," he said, "and it will be a regular little Sunday-school."

"You will need a great deal of grace," said his mother; but Joe was so much taken up with the novelty of the occasion that he hardly thought of that matter.

THY WORD



MY HEART

CHAPTER X.

A SUNDAY-SCHOOL.

JOE'S heart beat high when Sunday afternoon came at last, and he set out for the shaft with the office key in his pocket. There were a dozen or more boys standing about the door.

"How do you do, fellows," Joseph said, as he walked up briskly and thrust in the key. The door opened, and the crowd rushed in with some tumult. There was a fire banked up in the stove, which made the room quite warm and comfortable.

"Hurrah!" cried some of the boys, scrambling for seats.

"Fellows," said Joe, raising his voice above the clatter—but the boys were disputing about the benches, of which there were not enough to go round. "I'll begin to read," thought Joseph, and he opened the Bible.

“Oh, shut up now, fellows,” said Dick Fraley, distributing a few cuffs through the company, for Joe’s voice was altogether drowned. But the boys had not come there to be cuffed by Dick Fraley, and they told him so in such strong language that Joe’s Sunday-school was in much danger of ending in a fight. Joseph was thoroughly frightened. He had not counted on such a state of things, and in his distress he began to fall back upon God for protection. But he remembered that he had not prayed about this meeting; he had come there in his own strength. There was no time now for making confession, but Joe sent up a little cry for help, and it was a very humble one, and God heard it in his holy hill.

“Fellows,” said Joseph, speaking loud and firm, “Sunday-schools are to teach us how to get along without fighting.”

Dick Fraley dropped his arm, which had been raised threateningly, and the others subsided a little.

"All of us has got to have seats," said somebody.

"Say we bring in two kegs and a board," said Dick Fraley to Joseph, in an undertone.

Two boys were appointed to assist in executing this project, and amid great confusion the board was at last planted firmly upon the two kegs, and the boys were all accommodated. Then Joe began to read, but his audience were not acquainted with the art of listening.

"Shut up!" said Dick Fraley, who sat holding the board down while he tried to listen; but the boys would not shut up. They persisted in carrying on a miscellaneous conversation, which came to Joseph's ears in a distressing medley.

"Give me that jack-knife, will you—Tom Jones has got my knife," (remonstrance from Joseph). "Well, give me my jack-knife, and I'll stop talking: give me my knife"—uprising on the other side of the room. Two boys dispute over an arm-chair, the only one

in the room. Joe closes his Bible in despair. Dick offers to restore order by main force. Joe clears his throat.

“Boys, I am going to tell you a story.”

There is a lull in the audience.

“Once, a great while ago, there were some people that acted, just as you do.” The room is now completely hushed. “They all tried to get the best seats and the best other things, and the strong ones put down the weak ones. They always struck back when any one hurt them, and they loved their friends and hated their enemies. They had two kings over them: one was named Herod and the other Satan. Herod took their money away from them, and Satan took their hearts. They were expecting a king to come and reign over them who would deliver them out of all their trouble. By-and-by, they heard a man with rough garments crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord,’ and after that their king came to them. He was named King Jesus, and

he came down from heaven, which is a beautiful place where nothing ever happens to make one sad. He came because he loved them so much, and because no one else was able to save them from their troubles. But he did not wear a golden crown or sit upon a throne, as they had expected—so they hated him; but he continued to love them, and when they brought sick people to him he healed them. He told them how to live, and that they must love their enemies and pray for people that persecuted them, and always return good things for evil things, and be humble and pure in their hearts. He told them that he came to destroy Satan's kingdom and to bring them into God's kingdom; but they did not care for that. They only cared for being rid of King Herod, and when they were sure that Jesus had no money or worldly power to give them, they cruelly put him to death. But there were a few people who had learned to love and follow him, and he told them to go into all the

world and tell his story to every creature and he promised that whosoever believed on him should be saved. After he was crucified, some of his followers came and put his body in a grave ; but in three days he rose again, because he was the Son of God, and appeared to his friends, and while they were watching he ascended up into heaven, and a cloud received him out of their sight. He is there now, preparing beautiful places for all the people that love him, that they may be with him after they die. By-and-by, he will come down to the world again with power and great glory, and judge all the people ; and those that are in Satan's kingdom will be sent away into darkness. How many boys would like to come out of Satan's kingdom and belong to King Jesus ?" asked Joseph.

Dick lifted his hand slowly, then the rest of the boys raised theirs.

"Well," said Joseph, "you must stop fighting and learn to love each other ; but you

cannot do this unless you first love Christ. You must pray to him."

Joe's voice began to tremble. He was quite exhausted with the great strain that had been put upon him. He stood up, and asked the school to rise with him. Joe commenced the Lord's Prayer, Dick and John joining with him, and the rest following as best they were able. Then the school was dismissed, the boys going out as quietly as could have been expected.

Joe put up the shutters and straightened the benches. Dick fumbled in his pocket and presently drew out a New Testament.

"I disremember some of the things you read," he said to Joseph, "and I thought may be I might spell out considerable; so I bought a book for myself."

"Oh, Dick!" said Joe, "I am very glad you care to read the Bible."

Joe walked home beside little John Raney.

"John," he said, "do you like the Sunday-school?"

"Yes," said John Raney, "but I wish you'd sing 'Round the Throne.'"

"If the boys knew some hymns to sing, it would help you," said Lina, after Joe told the story of his experience.

"I wish they did," Joe answered.



CHAPTER XI.

THE MELODEON.

JOSEPH prayed very earnestly before he dared trust himself at the shaft the next Sunday. It was a solemn thing to stand up before those boys. His work increased in its demands as he went on with it. Many of the boys could read, and Testaments were needed; and besides, if there were only hymn books, they could learn some hymns.

Joe's head was very full of plans as he went home the second Sunday from his little meeting.

"We must have some books," he said to himself. "What are one or two Bibles among so many scholars."

If the good people down at the church had known of the necessity, I am sure they would have been quick to relieve it; but they did not know. Mr. Macaffie had sent mes-

sages of encouragement and sympathy to Joseph, but he had no idea that he was reading the Bible to so many boys. Joseph never thought of asking the church people to send them books, but another plan came to him. First, he put it out of his head resolutely. Then he took it back and turned it over and over, and shook his head and sighed, and said "I won't," and then, more mildly, "I can't," and finally he went to Lina with it.

"Lina," said he, "that Latin dictionary of mine cost a good deal of money."

"Yes, it did," said Lina, "but it's a very valuable book."

"I know it," answered Joseph, "but do you suppose you could exchange it at the bookstore for Testaments?"

Lina looked surprised. "Perhaps I could," she answered. "You can't use it now," she added, reflectively, "and you could use the Testaments."

"I've got to have the Testaments, you mean," said Joe, testily.

Giving up this lexicon was a sore trial to him. Lina was not a quarrelsome person, so the two were soon discussing amicably how many books it was likely could be obtained for the dictionary.

"Six will do," said Joseph, "for I shall not let the boys take them home at present, and two can look over together; and Lina, we must have some singing-books. Perhaps you can get a few cheap ones."

Lina promised to make the best bargain possible, and Joe secretly kissed his beloved lexicon as he bade it a regretful adieu. The next day Lina took a trip down street with a very large bundle, and when Joe came home that night six nice Testaments lay upon the table and six hymn-books with paper covers.

"You're a jolly girl, Lina," said Joe, with sparkling eyes.

"Those books have 'Around the Throne,' in them," said Lina. "I chose them instead of another kind, because you said the little boy liked that song."

What a sensation it made when Joe brought his new purchases to the shaft the next Sunday! When the hymn-books were taken out, little John Raney clapped his small hands with delight. Every week the school was growing more orderly. Its services were very simple. First all rose and repeated the Lord's prayer reverently—most of the boys knew it perfectly now; then Joe read aloud some story from the Bible, trying to apply its teachings to their lives as best he knew how. Afterwards each boy was asked to read a few verses from the Testament. Last of all came the hymn-books, but with these they made very sorry work.

"If we could once all fetch up together," said Dick Fraley, who was making his best endeavors, and looked very much disturbed.

I am sure no one could possibly have guessed what tune they were singing; and as Joe struggled on, he became more and more convinced that the fault was in the leader.

"Boys," he said at last, laying the book down, "we're having a bad time of it, but you mustn't get discouraged. I'm afraid I'm not much of a singer, but I know some one that is. If it were not for one thing, I would ask the person to come and teach us; but I'm afraid you wouldn't behave well, and the person would get frightened."

All the boys promised solemnly to do their best, and Joe said he would see about it.

"Lina," said Joseph that night, "there is nobody to lead our singing."

"That's a pity," said Lina.

"Well, what shall we do about it?" asked Joseph.

"There must be some way," Lina answered.

"I know a way," said Joe.

"Why don't you do it, then?" said his sister.

"Because I don't know whether I can," replied her brother. "You can sing, Lina," he continued.

"Some," responded Lina.

"Well, then, you can come down to the shaft and help us."

"Oh, I cannot!" Lina turned quite pale. "I should be afraid of those boys."

"They wouldn't hurt you," Joseph answered, encouragingly, "they promised to behave."

"You did not tell them I would come!" exclaimed Lina.

"No, not exactly. I told them I knew of some one who if she—if the person wasn't afraid, and they all promised to behave like gentlemen."

Lina looked very thoughtful, and presently she consulted her mother.

"I think girls must take up crosses sometimes, as well as boys," said Mrs. Ruff, smiling; and after that Lina by degrees made up her mind.

"Joe," she said at last, "I think perhaps I could do it if I had my little melodeon to help me."

Lina's melodeon was a small affair, but it made very sweet music under the touch of her skillful fingers.

Joe took this idea into consideration, and announced his conclusion.

"It's such a dot of a thing, we might carry it with us in the little four-wheeled cart."

"Would it be right to do that on Sunday?" his sister asked.

The children went to their mother, who thought if the melodeon should be made all ready the night beforehand, there would be no wrong in drawing it quietly behind them to the shaft, where it would help them so much to praise God.

"And the cart will be very good to carry the books in," said Joseph. "They are almost too heavy to take in my hands."

So on Saturday night the melodeon was lifted into the little cart and the Testaments were placed carefully beside it, and when Sunday afternoon came, Joe and Lina drew

their load carefully down the yard and out into the street.

"I'm so glad you're going, Lina," said Joseph. "Won't the boys be surprised!"

And so they were surprised, when Lina and her little melodeon came in sight. They looked on with admiring wonder while Joseph, with Dick's help, lifted it from the cart and placed it before the desk in the office. Lina was dreadfully frightened at first, but playing a little prelude quieted her, and then they all sang "Around the Throne." It was wonderful how much better it sounded than on the last Sunday. They tried several other hymns with very good success, and just before the school closed they sang "Around the Throne" over again, and it was really beautiful. Joe thought a shadow fell across the room several times, and at last, looking up suddenly, he saw the face of the superintendent looking in at the window. Being caught peeping, the man came around to the door.

The Sprag Boy.



"Suddenly he saw the face of the superintendent looking in at the window."

“I thought I would come up and see that there wasn’t no goings on,” he said, apologetically. “That there was right good singin’.”

The school had closed now, and Joe wanted to ask him to come again, but felt afraid. He thought also about offering him a Testament, but he did not venture to do that either. However, as he walked home beside Lina, drawing the melodeon, he put up a prayer for his rough master.

Lina went again to the shaft Sunday-school the next Sunday, and more hymns were learned. Joe thought nothing seemed to soften his reckless pupils so much as the beautiful songs. The face of the superintendent did not appear again at the window, but when the meeting was over and Joe and Lina had locked up the office and were going away together, they saw the figure of the superintendent disappear among the shaft-buildings.

“I believe it must be the singing that

makes him come there," said Joseph. After that Lina went regularly to the shaft every week.

A change was coming over Dick Fraley. Joe noticed it, though he was not often with him. He was growing very quiet, and his voice was no longer heard among the quarrelsome groups in the streets. His face too, was several shades lighter, besides being more pleasant in expression, and he began to wear collars and cuffs at Sunday-school.

"You see," he explained to Joseph, "I never drank much, but I used to spend a good bit of money a goin' round with the fellows, and I've been hankerin' after some better clothes lately."

Joe told him that he looked first-rate in a collar. Sometimes Joe caught Dick's eye fastened upon him with a wistful expression, as though he had it in his mind to speak of something; but Joe was not very quick at reading people's thoughts, and Dick was slow at talking.

One Sunday the school had been more quiet than usual. The Bible reading was all finished, and there came a little silence before the last hymn was given out. Joe looked up in surprise as Dick Fraley rose to his feet slowly. What a deep stillness fell upon the room, as every face was turned toward him!

"Fellows," he said, speaking laboriously, "I've broke company with Satan, and I'm a trying to follow after King Jesus. I thought I'd like to let you know it."

Dick sat down again, and Joe's face flushed and paled with deep emotion. There was the faintest possible stir in the corner and little John Raney stood up and turned his face towards Joseph while he said, earnestly:

"I'm trying, too."

Joe trembled. He did not dare to break the solemn silence. He felt that God had come down from heaven, and that his presence filled the house. Lina bowed her head upon the melodeon. Joe rose and the school stood reverently with him, while they re-

peated the Lord's Prayer together. Then Joe added a few humble, faltering words, thanking God and praying that Dick's words might become the words of every one in the room. The boys went out silently, and Dick and Joseph lifted the melodeon into the wagon. Then Lina sat upon the steps and waited while Joe went back with Dick and John Raney, and they three held a prayer-meeting and claimed the promise where two or three are gathered together.

"Joe," said Lina on the way home, "if you had not gone to work in the coal mine, Dick might not have become a Christian."

"Oh, Lina," said Joe, quickly, "I haven't done anything at all. It is God that did it."

"But you carried the Bibles," persisted his sister. "You gave the message."

"If we could only teach more persons," said Joseph; "there are so many, many wicked boys and men about this place, and we read the Bible to such a very few of them."

"I know it," said Lina, "and sometimes it

makes me feel sad ; but I think if we do steadily all the work that God appoints for us, perhaps some day he may give us more."

Joe was very thankful for the blessings that had come to his two friends, the miner boys, and the thought of it cheered him in his dull dark days in the coal mine. Yet life sometimes seemed very dreary to him. The pleasant spring was coming on again, and all the world was full of hope, but there seemed to be no hope for him. Would God always keep him at sprag-making? Would he be willing to stay there all his life? One day this question came to him like a clear, sharp message. Joseph's heart rose in resistance.

"I could not bear it," he cried, in great anguish. "It may be God's will," said a voice within. Joseph struggled with the fear that fell upon him, and his hands trembled as he held the hatchet. Again and again he tried to face the long, dark future, and his dear hopes receded from him like dissolving dreams.

"I must submit to God," he said at last, in despair; but after this came a thought that seemed to him like a new one: "God is good."

"He is good," said Joseph; "he is my Father, and he is taking care of me. I don't need to ask myself whether I would be willing to stay here all my life, because I don't know what his plans are. I only need to be willing to stay a day at a time."

So Joseph became more quiet. It was not too hard to stay that day, and he need not think about the next. While he worked these thoughts came to him. God was very pitiful. He understood all Joseph's griefs and disappointments. The great tears began to roll over his cheeks, and he felt how tender a thing is the sympathy of Jesus.

Thus, after a time, Joseph's heart was comforted, and he almost felt like singing at his work in the mine. It was a warm spring evening, and the pleasant air fanned his face as he walked home from his work, feeling calmer than for many weeks before.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXPLOSION.

THE family slept unusually late the next morning, and Lina bustled over the delayed breakfast, while Joe sat rather dreamily at the window. He was flagging a little under the influences of the mild weather. Perhaps the long winter of confinement and mental struggle was beginning to tell upon him. At any rate, Joe's steps lagged heavily as he went away to his work.

"I'm sure he'll be late this time," said Lina to her mother, as she watched him from the window.

Joe was late, indeed. There were no groups standing about the mine as he came in sight of it. All had gone down except a few stragglers, who, like himself, were hurrying towards the place. How the black shaft buildings loomed against the hazy sky, with

the great fan always waving to and fro, forcing strong currents of air down through the shaft into the dark galleries. But while Joseph looked, a little curl of smoke came up from some of the gearing, and a tongue of fire ran along the oily rope that worked the fan. Joe stood watching like one fascinated. Then came a flash, a quick blaze, and the great fan swinging slowly forward swept a column of fire down the shaft.

One moment of awful silence, and then a deep, heavy explosion came up from the ground, and shook the warm, hazy air. The sound reverberated through the valley, and fell upon the ears of the inhabitants like a knell.

Then up from all the streets came hurrying feet, and pale faces. "The explosion!" they said to one another under their breath. Now black crowds surged between Joseph and the coal-mine, and he went on like one in a dream, and mingled with them, and heard the shrieks of unhappy wives and

children as they saw the flames mount out of the pit.

"There is no hope; we cannot reach them." These words rang through the crowd like a wail of despair.

Joseph heard no more. The thick smoke stifled him, and the dreadful scene seemed to fall away like a troubled dream. A few moments later the superintendent hurrying that way stumbled over something. He stooped down and picked up Joseph.

"Praise the Lord, you aint down there," he said, holding him in his arms. But there was work to be done, and numbers of terrified men looked to the superintendent for direction.

"Look a here," he said, hailing one of them, "Get a hand-cart and take this boy home to his mother. Tell her there aint nothing happened to him, and she can thank God for it. Mind you be quick, and handle him gentle. You'd better dash some water in his face to fetch him out of his faint."

Down the road from the story-and-a-half house came two women running. There were no bonnets upon their heads, and their faces were white with fear. They had heard the sullen roar, and they saw the smoke rise over the hill that hid them from the coal-mine. They saw the cart, too, coming up the road with something in it. The man who drew it gesticulated at first, and then left his burden and ran toward them.

"He be all right, ma'am," he said, "your boy be. He haint been near the coal mine. He be only dropped away with the fright."

Lina and her mother ran to Joseph. They prayed over him and cried over him, as they brought him home and laid him upon his bed. At length Joe came out of his swoon, but a bright fire glowed in his cheeks and burned through his veins, and he talked incoherently of the mine.

"Must I work there always, mother? Will God never take me out?" and then he would cry out in great terror, "The smoke, the

smoke! See it creeping along the ropes, mother; and the fire is blowing in my face from the great fan!"

While Joseph lay tossing in delirium the black throng surged about the shaft. The flames at last died away from the pit, and brave men were let down with ropes, and brought up the dead and dying. Ah me, it was a pitiful sight!

Day after day the fever burned in Joseph's veins, and his mother and Lina hung over him like two shadows. The great doctor came and counted Joe's pulse carefully by his gold watch. But by-and-by the fever burned out, and Joe lay weak and white upon his pillow. Then came broths and jellies, and all dainties, for Joe was getting better; and one day when he was able to hear it, Mrs. Ruff told him of all the sad tragedy that had begun with that little curl of smoke, and how, all the weeks while he lay tossing with fever, Dick and little John Raney were in heaven, safe and happy, singing about

God's throne. As he listened, Joe turned his head quietly, and the great tears rolled down upon his pillow.



CHAPTER XIII.

A HAPPY ENDING.

EVERY day Joseph was growing stronger, and as he sat on his easy chair and watched his mother busy with her needle, his thoughts were busy over a great dread that stared at him in the future.

"Mother," he said, at last, "is the shaft in order again?"

"Not yet," replied his mother. "I believe it will be soon."

"Mother," he said, in quivering tones, "do you think I shall soon be able to go back?"

Mrs. Ruff laid down her work, and put her arms about him. "God willing," she said, "you shall never go back there. I believe your mission in the coal mine is ended."

Joseph lay back in his chair with a contented expression.

"Mother," he said, lifting his head again.

"Well, my son."

"I must do something."

"True," said his mother, "but God will provide a way for you in due time."

One day the superintendent came to visit Joseph, bringing a tender young chicken to tempt his appetite.

"You're comin' through splendid, my boy," he said, heartily. "You'll be runnin' around town again in less than no time. It's right lonesome up at the shaft," he continued, "without the Sunday meetin'. I've been goin' to church regular ever since you was sick."

"Have you?" cried Joe and Lina.

"Yes," said the man earnestly, "and I've made up my mind to stick to it as long as I live. Well, good-bye, my little man," he continued, as he rose to go, "I don't suppose we shall ever see you around the coal mine again. I am that sorry as I hadn't ought to be, seein' as it wasn't your rightful place."

"I don't know," said Joseph, his face clouding, "you may see me there. You know I must do something for a living."

"Yes, yes," said the man, cheerily, "but don't you worry. If I am to believe what I hear, somebody is a goin' to take a rise in the world before long. I reckon you'll forget as you ever was a sprag boy, Joseph."

"I shall never forget that," said Joseph, looking puzzled.

"What does he mean?" he asked his mother, after their visitor was gone.

But neither Mrs. Ruff nor Lina was able to throw any light upon the subject.

It was that same afternoon that the Ruffs received another visitor, a tall gentleman in fine broadcloth.

"I come on business," he said, taking the chair which Mrs. Ruff placed for him, and setting his glossy silk hat upon the table. Joe was not long in recognizing in their visitor the principal man of the borough, whose opinions carried weight, and whose

name headed the list of bank officers. Joseph could not help feeling overawed by the near proximity of so much greatness.

"I am wanting a clerk at the bank," said the gentleman, addressing Joe's mother, "and your son's name has been mentioned to me. I am not in the habit of making personal application to young gentlemen," he continued, smiling, "they generally apply to me; but in this case I have made an exception, on account of sickness. You have been well spoken of by my friend, Mr. Macaffie," he continued, turning to Joseph. "I understand you were a sprag boy before the late disaster."

"Yes, sir," said Joseph, flushing deeply, and feeling what an immeasurable distance this fact placed between them.

"I suppose it is not common to go from a coal mine to a banking house," continued the gentleman, "but I am very glad to be able to say that you have earned, as a sprag boy, the character that recommended you to

a much better position. I called upon your recent employer, the mine superintendent, and he showed me two sprags which he had picked up in the gallery, and was pleased to consider an index of your character. He assured me that you had made them so smooth and shapely from pure faithfulness, without a hope of notice or reward. Faithfulness is a quality which we require in a bank clerk, and it is not always easy to find it. I hope that as soon as you are recovered you will accept the situation which I now offer to you."

"But, sir," said Joseph, stammering, and quite overcome by this unlooked-for praise, "did the superintendent tell you about the—I was unfaithful once, sir."

"I know," said the gentleman, with a gesture which implied his knowledge of the the mule-car transaction, and his intention to overlook it.

"By the way, that reminds me—I hear you are fond of Latin, and banking hours are

much shorter than hours of labor in the coal mine. I have a tutor for my boys this year, and I have authorized him to make an appointment with you for any time you may choose after business hours, if you care to recite to him. I think you have learned the lesson not to let Latin books interfere with other duties."

Joseph colored deeply as he seemed to catch a glimpse again of the poor, dead mule lying in the dark gallery, which echoed with the reverberation of oaths.

"I hope I have," said Joseph, humbly. He could in no wise find words to express his astonishment and gratitude at the prospects which were opening before him; but his new patron, waiving all thanks, soon completed the arrangements and took his leave, not without mentioning his late friend, Joseph's father, and expressing pleasure that he was able to do something for his son.

It must have been reception-day at the Ruff mansion, for before the family had had

time to recover their equanimity after the banker's visit, another visitor came through the yard.

"Well, well," said Mr. Macaffie, shaking hands all around with joyful excitement. "Didn't I tell you the Lord would surprise you some day, Joseph, if you would only trust him in prison? It was worth while to bide his time, wasn't it? Why, this is better than going to Greenbarre, for you can not only study, but you can earn money for your mother, too."

Mr. Macaffie drew up his chair, and told how he had a plan to get them all up among their own sort of people at the other end of the town.

"The church folks always said you ought not to be living down here," he continued, "but somehow nobody ever saw a way to prevent it before."

He went on to say that now there was a small house to be had quite near both to the church and the bank, and his wife thought

that since Mrs. Ruff was not very strong, she ought to give up the harder work of dress-making, and devote her time to millinery. His wife already knew of several ladies that would like to go to her, and no doubt they could influence more. Mr. Macaffie also offered to assist Joe's mother in disposing of her house and getting into the new one.

"You are doing so much for us, Mr. Macaffie," said Joseph, gratefully.

"It's God that's doing it, my dear boy," he answered. "I am only one of the instruments. For a long time, you know, I could not lift a finger to help you; but I prayed a great deal about it, and by-and-by the Lord put my hand upon the string that brought the blessings. And there is another thing—remember that if you had not been a faithful sprag boy, you would never have found favor in the eyes of the bank president." Many matters were discussed before Mr. Macaffie left them; among others the Sunday-school at the shaft.

“You must not think of giving that up,” said Mr. Macaffie. “The Lord only means to enlarge your opportunities by taking you out of the coal mine. We must see if we cannot get the use of that red school-house across the street for the Sabbath-school, and I mean to speak to some of the brethren about having a collection taken up next Sunday for more books. It’s high time the church waked up to its duty toward these miners.”

What a happy future was opening before the Ruff family! God had taken down the great, blank wall that seemed to stand between them and hope. No doubt Joe still sent a few regretful thoughts over the mountains toward Greenbarre; but I think as the months rolled by, he found God’s way not only the best, but the most pleasant.

They were all sitting together at twilight in the parlor of the story-and-a-half house, and it was their last Sunday there.

“Mother,” said Joseph, breaking a long

silence, "It was better for me to be a sprag boy than to go to Greenbarre. It was very dark in the coal mine, but that was where I found Christ; and besides," he added, "while I am living out the rest of my life on earth, I can have it to think of, that Dick and little John Raney are safe with God in heaven."

GATHER THE PEOPLE



GATHER THE CHILDREN





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